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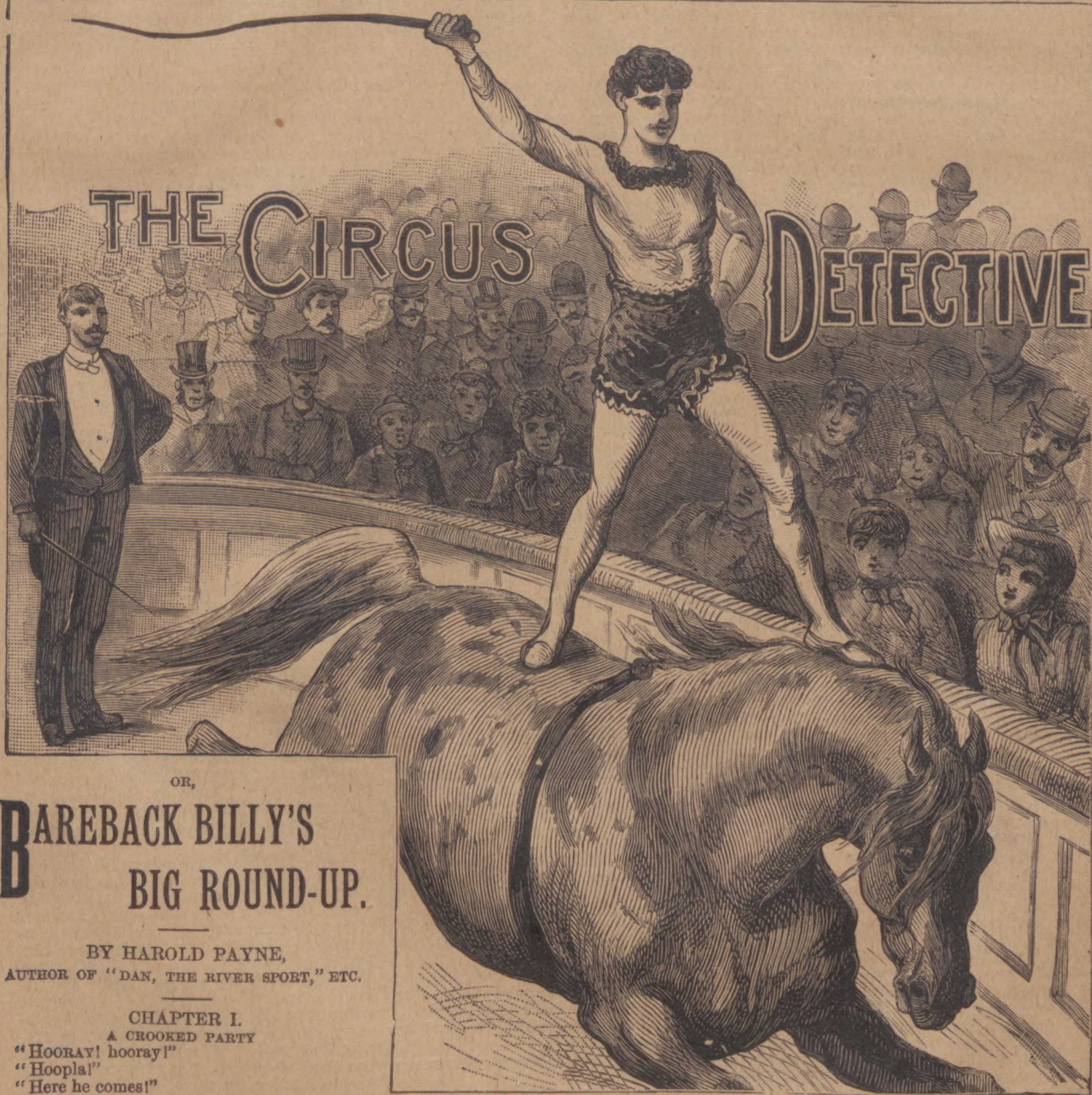
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OR,
**BAREBACK BILLY'S
BIG ROUND-UP.**

BY HAROLD PAYNE,
AUTHOR OF "DAN, THE RIVER SPORT," ETC.

CHAPTER I.
A CROOKED PARTY

"Hooray! hooray!"

"Hoopla!"

"Here he comes!"

The band had struck up a lively air, and the pent-up enthusiasm which had been fermenting

THE FAMOUS PONY "CHARLEYBOY" DASHED INTO THE RING, AND STANDING ERECT ON HIS BACK WAS THE GREAT AND ONLY "BAREBACK BILLY."

and boiling in the breasts of a thousand youths for the past half hour, burst forth at last in a perfect cyclone of wild yells, screeches, squalls and other manifestations of delight.

And the cause is easily explained.

For a month previous the boys of the ambitious little city of Big Rapids had kept their eyes on the big showy posters announcing the appearance in town, on a certain date, of the great Rawlding & Spodgers circus, one of the leading features of which, it was announced, was the inimitable boy bareback rider, Billy Bristol, better known to circus goers as Bareback Billy.

This young equestrian, although but little more than eighteen, had already earned a wide reputation both as a daring and graceful ring-rider and detective, having succeeded more than once in detecting, from his perilous position on the flying steed, men in the vast throng who had eluded both the police and the more noted detectives of the country.

None of these facts were lost on the youthful devotees of the ring, and the announcement that this same wonderful young man was to appear in their town aroused the younger members of the population to a frenzy of enthusiasm.

It was with feverish anxiety, therefore, that the thousand or more assembled under the tent that afternoon, watching the programme for the moment when their favorite should dash into the ring on his vivacious pony and delight them with his daring exploits.

At length the moment arrived.

A rather tiresome performance of trained dogs had been endured by the boys in the audience; then they had listened to some very stale jokes from the funny clown; then the band played a lively air, and Young America could contain its enthusiasm no longer, for all knew what was coming.

The ring-master had already heralded the world-renowned bareback rider; the funny clown, with his wide trousers and ridiculously painted face, stood with legs widespread, distended eyes and his painted lips drawn into the form of a big red O, in apparent eager expectancy, when suddenly the famous clay-bank pony Charleyboy dashed into the ring, shaking his comical head as if he were as eager for the fun as any auditor on the seats, and standing erect on his back was the favorite and delight of all, the great and only Bareback Billy!

The uproar became instantly deafening.

Even the tumultuous blare of the great horns and the thunders of the great bass-drum were drowned in the din.

Bareback Billy smiled and bowed from one side to the other, as his spirited little steed bounded around the sawdust inclosure, and was to all appearances as happy as any one in the big tent.

Billy cracked his whip to increase the pony's speed, stood on one foot, turned backward and forward summersets, sat alternately upon the pony's neck and upon the very end of the back, so that the on-lookers held their breath, expecting to see him lose his balance and fall off, but he never did—that is, accidentally.

But suddenly he would pretend to slip off, and when the pony would gallop ahead without his rider, the lads on the seats would grow grave and marvel how the wonderful rider would ever regain his place on the pony.

But the puzzle was soon explained.

Billy would stand by the side of the ring, quietly swaying his long whip, and when the pony would come dashing past the rider would place his hands upon the animal's crupper, and the next instant vault gracefully upon his back.

After this several men in queer costumes, among them the funny clown, came out, each carrying a sort of stool in one hand and a hoop covered with paper in the other.

The stools were placed at the edge of the ring, on various sides, and the queer-looking men including the funny clown, mounted them.

Then they raised the hoops and held them above their heads.

Then Billy, who had been sitting during these preparations, sidewise on his pony, apparently dreaming, suddenly gave his pony a cut with his whip and the ring steed shot off around the circle like wind.

Pretty soon Billy made a spring and stood upon his feet.

The first round he hopped over the hoops, but the second round, to the extreme delight of the youngsters, he went dashing headlong through the hoops paper and all, turning a summerset and landing with his feet on the pony's bare back.

Each one of these feats was followed with a perfect pandemonium of screeches and yells of delight from Young America, on the seats.

After performing this and many more daring feats Bareback Billy dropped astride of his pony and galloped around the ring a number of times at an easy gait, for the apparent purpose of resting from his hard labor.

There was a good-natured smile on the acrobat's features, but his dark eyes wandered over the audience, studying each face with the greatest earnestness.

It is doubtful if there were three people beneath that big tent who suspected the ring-rider's real motive for this action.

Indeed, those who had seen him before, and only knew him as a rider, supposed it to be only a habit of the young equestrian, for he was never seen to perform without doing the same thing.

And even if any one had suspected that he had any other motive, aside from resting, he would probably have forgotten his suspicion a moment later when he saw Billy suddenly hop to his feet again and resume his perilous evolutions.

When the bareback tumbler had at last finished his performance and the pony had darted out of the ring, followed by his rider, who had stopped to make his bow, and then ran into the dressing-room, he was met by a large, quiet, good-natured looking man, who grasped his hand and asked:

"Well, my boy, what luck?"

"Oh! is that you, captain?" exclaimed the boy, surprised at meeting Captain Hunter, the detective.

"Didn't expect to see me here, did you, Billy?"

"No, sir; I'll be switched if I did. What brings you away out here?"

"Oh, the same old business," returned the big man, with a good-humored chuckle. "But you didn't answer my question. What luck?"

"Not much, sir."

"No sight of the game?"

"Yes, and no," said Billy, doubtfully.

"What do you mean?"

"There is a man in the audience who is the picture of Fielding, at one moment, and at the very next he don't look any more like him than I do."

"That is strange," mused the big man.

"It is strange. I never saw anything like it before."

"And you are not often deceived in faces, either, my boy."

"Very seldom; but this one gives me a set-to."

The big man reflected a moment, and then said:

"Perhaps, if I should see him, I could

decide the point. Two heads are sometimes better than one, you know."

"If one is a mutton-head," giggled the funny clown, who came slouching by at that moment.

"And it is easy to see who has the mutton-head," retorted Billy, administering a playful kick to the grinning buffoon. "None of your stale gags here, Mullen."

Then, turning to the big man, he resumed:

"Very well, captain; just wait a second until I slip on some civilized togs over these tights and I'll go in with you. The party might tumble if he saw me come back in this rig."

And, retiring to another part of the dressing room, the young athlete had soon attired himself in the habiliments of ordinary life, to which was added a slouch hat pulled well down over his eyes.

The two friends then slipped into the large tent, where another performance was already in progress, and moved slowly around the passage at the foot of the benches, apparently looking for seats.

At Billy's suggestion, the big man did not raise his eyes to the tiers of faces ranged above them, as this would be likely to arouse the suspicion of the suspected party, and the ring-rider had located his man so well, as he believed, that this was not necessary, anyway.

At length he came to a point from which he thought it safe to take a reconnoiter of the faces in the vicinity of where he had located his game.

A brief sweep of his eyes was sufficient, and he whispered:

"On the third tier from the top, with a white high hat."

CHAPTER II.

MYSTERIOUS TRANSFORMATION.

No sooner had Captain Hunter raised eyes in the direction indicated, than he whispered, excitedly:

"Our man, Billy! How shall I get at him?"

"It won't do to tackle him where he sits," the keen-witted boy decided, promptly, "for the moment he sees us coming up after him through that crowd he will smell a mouse, slide down the backs of the seats and escape under the canvas."

"What is to be done, then?"

"My plan," returned the young equestrian, "would be to wait until the performance is over, keeping your eyes on him in the mean time, and when the crowd begins to move, slip through the mob, get as near the fellow as possible, and, when he least expects it, nab him. You stay here while I go and dress myself; then I'll come out and join you."

Returning to the dressing room, Billy removed his tights, the make-up from his face and other tokens of his profession, and returned to the audience tent, looking as little like a showman as any man in the crowd.

Walking to the place where he had left the captain, he was surprised to find him gone, and at once glancing in the direction where the man with the white hat had sat, was still more surprised and chagrined to discover that the suspect also had disappeared.

Another surprise: the seat where the fellow had sat was occupied by a man not entirely unlike Fielding, except in the absence of a pointed beard which the suspect had possessed, while the high white hat had disappeared and a soft black one had taken its place.

The keen-witted boy instantly surmised that it was Fielding, and that the crack crook had effected these changes in ap-

pearance to mislead and mystify any detective on his track.

But the captain had disappeared! Where to and why?

In vain the boy scanned the tiers of seats, and walked around the ring; Captain Hunter was nowhere to be seen.

Disappointed in his search, the young circus expert decided to keep his eyes on the suspect until the performance was concluded, and then learn, if possible, who he was; so he took a seat where he could keep the fellow in sight.

The man betrayed no suspicion, but seemingly enjoyed the performance with as much zest as any observer under the canvas.

At length, the performance ending, the big audience began to push forward for the exit, while Billy pushed up through the descending throng in the direction of his man, and when within a few feet of him paused to wait for him to descend.

The man had his back turned, but Billy knew it was the suspect; but—one more astonished; when the fellow turned his head, Billy's heart almost stood still.

If it was the man, he had again undergone a complete change of facial appearance.

His face was entirely smooth now, and, what had appeared to the boy to be blue eyes before were certainly very black now.

So completely bewildered was the young ring-rider that he could do nothing but stare, and actually permitted the fellow to walk down to the bottom of the benches and leave the tent unmolested.

Billy, still bewildered, also descended, and when he reached the ground whom should he run against but Captain Hunter.

The detective was flushed and out of breath, as if he had been running.

"Where did you go?" demanded Billy, half angrily.

"Go?" panted the big man; "why, I've been chasing that scoundrel, Fielding!"

"Been chasing him?" echoed Billy.

"Yes, and a merry chase he gave me, but all to no purpose. Just as I was at his very heels, he slipped into the crowd, managed to dodge back into the tent, and that was the last of him!"

Billy stared at his friend.

"Why, Captain Hunter, that fellow never left his seat from the time I first spied him until the close of the show—just this minute."

"You are mistaken, Billy. Your back was scarcely turned when the fellow glanced nervously, as I imagined, toward the ring exit where you went out; then he arose and hurriedly picked his way down through the crowd to the ground and walked rapidly toward the canvas exit."

"And you followed? How far did he go?"

"Only a few steps away from the entrance, where he turned and went around the tent at a rapid walk. I increased my pace, and by the time he again got around to the entrance I was almost upon his heels. But at that moment a large crowd came out of the tent—those who did not wait for the concert, I suppose—and my man must have had a ticket, for he dodged in, and before I could arrange it with the doorkeeper to get back, the fellow had succeeded in losing himself in the crowd."

Billy drew another long breath. "There is some great mystery here, captain," he averred. "Did you notice any change in the man's face from the time that I first pointed him out to you and when he left the tent?"

"Change? No. What do you mean?"

"I mean, was there no change in his appearance from the one time to the other?"

"Not that I noticed. Why do you ask?"

Billy then told of the changes which had taken place in the man's face from the time he had gone to the dressing-room until his return, and again from the time he had climbed to the top of the seats until he saw the fellow start to descend.

The captain looked at the boy incredulously.

"A strange piece of business, Billy, and the only way to account for it is, that there are two of them," he assured.

"I can easily believe that there are two, or even more of them," mused Billy, "as these gentry generally travel in pairs or squads, but what especially puzzles me is that the fellow I saw the last time was, with the exception of the changes I have mentioned, as near alike the other as a twin brother."

"What became of him?"

"Why, like your man he gave me the slip and lost himself in the crowd."

"Well, my boy," observed the captain, laughing, and taking the boy's hand, "he's done us both this time, but we must trust to luck to give us a better deal next time. Come around to the hotel with me."

CHAPTER III.

SLICK GAME.

The young acrobat accompanied the detective to the hotel, where they took supper together and then retired to the captain's room for a confab.

"I wonder whether there could be any mistake," began Billy, as soon as they were seated, taking a photograph from his pocket and examining it. "It certainly looks like the same face, only he had his mustache and pointed beard on when this was taken. Was this the only photograph you could get of him?"

"Yes," replied the captain, "and a deuce of a time I had securing that. You see, the fellow has been slick enough not to get his portrait into the rogues' gallery yet."

"How did you manage to scoop this one?"

"There was quite a trick in that, my boy," laughed the veteran quick-touch detective, "and I feel a little proud of it. You see, the newspaper reporter, in chronicling the robbery, implied that the job had been done by a certain Slade, alias Whitcomb, alias several other things, but whose real name was probably Fielding, and stated that he belonged to a respectable family in New York. Consulting the directory, I came upon the name of David S. Fielding, and concluded to chance it, so went to the number indicated. The number given was a flat. I rang up the janitor, but a woman answered the call. She stated that David Fielding actually lived there, but was not at home. I then informed the lady, for such she seemed to be, that I was anxious to take up a note of mine which Mr. Fielding held, and that no matter whether the gentleman was at home or not, if she could find the note I would be glad to pay it off."

"She seemed pleased at the idea of getting the money, and, inviting me up into the little reception-room, proceeded to another room to look for the fictitious note, which I was sure she would never find."

"Nevertheless, the scheme afforded me an opportunity to look about the cozy place a bit, and about the first thing I ran upon was a photograph album."

"It did not take me long to thumb over that album, you may be sure, and was soon rewarded by finding a picture of my man therein."

"How did you know it was he?" interposed the boy, curiously.

"Ah, there is the trick of the business," smiled Captain Hunter. "Your experience as a detective has not been extended enough to have learned this fact, so I will give it to you as a pointer. Any close student of human nature will tell you that after a man and woman have lived together for a length of time they gradually assume a resemblance to each other."

"Is that so?" demanded the young man, in surprise.

"It is a fact, and by watching this it may serve you many a good turn, as it has me in times gone by."

"But how did you know the woman whom you met was Fielding's wife?"

"Only presumption. She was too young for his mother, I judged, and the peculiar interest she took in the matter, when I spoke of taking up my note, showed that she was not his sister, for had she been his sister, she would have evinced some hesitancy about meddling with his affairs. And then, when I came upon the picture in the album the correspondence of relationship impressed itself upon me at once. There could be no doubt about it. I knew they were husband and wife."

"This is most remarkable!" declared the boy, with an awed expression. "And so you filched the picture?"

"Not just then. I was on the point of doing so, when the woman suddenly reappeared, to ask me some question about the note—let me see—oh, yes, she came to ask me my name, so that she could recognize the note when she saw it. I gave her a fictitious name, and she went away again, and again I started to extract the picture, when she once more popped in upon me to ask another question. And so it went on, until I had begun to despair of securing the picture, so the last time she left I made no bones about the matter, and snatched the picture out, fetching away half the leaf at the same time."

"After an interminably long search she at length came back to say that she was unable to find the note among his papers, and wanted to know if I couldn't pay it and take her receipt for the money. I informed her bluntly that I didn't do business that way, and requested to know when her hubby would be back."

"To this she answered that she did not know; so I left, with the promise of calling again when he should be at home."

"And brought the picture with you?"

"And brought the picture with me."

"But how did you come to think that he would come to this part of the country and that he would be likely to attend the circus? And, finally, how did you come to think of sending the picture to me?"

"All in a nutshell, my boy," laughed the quick-touch detective. "The little talk I had with the woman convinced me that she and her husband had come from Michigan. I did not learn what part, nor did I try to find out; but, as I left the flat, I had a glance into the diminutive kitchen, the door of which was open, and there I espied a packing-case with the name of some firm in Big Rapids on it."

"Then I thought of you. You had told me that you were going to be with a circus this summer which would travel through Michigan, Wisconsin and some of the other lake countries, so I procured a copy of the 'Clipper,' and made a note of the date your show would reach this town, and then mailed the photograph and instructions accordingly. I knew in reason that if he were in the town he would be pretty likely to attend the circus."

"And everything turned out as you expected."

"Yes, except the running of my man in."

"That was unfortunate, but it could not be avoided under the circumstances."

"It might have been," mused the detective, "if I had foreseen that everything would turn out as I had hoped, but hardly expected. I should have telegraphed to the sheriff to be ready to help me out."

While the captain was still speaking there was a rap at the door, which, on being opened, disclosed a small boy standing in the hall.

"What is wanting, my boy?" asked the detective.

"Air you the gen'leman I seen chasin' a man roun' the circus tent this afternoon?" inquired the urchin.

Hunter looked the little fellow over curiously, and at length answered:

"Perhaps. Why?"

"The feller was Con Dobson, wasn't he?" persisted the lad.

The detective was at something of a loss how to answer this question, but ventured:

"I believe so, sonny."

"Well, I reckon he's been a-doin' somethin', hain't he?"

"Never mind what he has been doing," interposed Captain Hunter out of patience; "what is it you want?"

"W'y, sir, if it was Con Dobson, an' he's been a-doin' somethin' ag'in, I know whur' yer kin find 'im."

"Can you lead me to the place?"

"Yep, I reckon."

"If you can, and will, my boy," cried the detective, enthusiastically, "you shall be well paid."

"Nuff said," grunted the boy. "Come on an' I'll steer yer to the right place."

"How is this, Billy, my boy?" exclaimed Hunter. "Come on!"

Billy, walking, surveyed the boy a moment, and then asked:

"Aren't you the boy I saw stealing peanuts out of the fakir's basket this afternoon?"

"Nope!" wiping his nose on his sleeve.

"I'm pretty sure you're the same boy, but if you'll lead us to the hiding place of Con Dobson, as you call him, I'll let you off!"

"All right. Here she goes!"

The boy led the way, and the two men soon found themselves several blocks from the hotel on one of the principal streets of the town, which was filled with small stores and innumerable drinking saloons.

Pretty soon the boy, stopping before one of the saloons of the better order, pointed with his finger, and said:

"That's hit, mister. Con's right in there, playin' cards."

Hunter and Billy entered the place at once.

The front room opened into a bar, beyond which was a small room with some tables in it.

It was rather dusky in the room, so Hunter ordered the drinks in order to give himself time to reconnoiter. At that moment a man arose from a table in the rear room, and Hunter saw at a glance that it was Fielding.

CHAPTER IV.

A SKIRMISH.

The man did not appear to see Hunter and Billy, if indeed he recognized them. He strode into the front room, and appeared to be on the point of walking out of the door when the detective stepped in front of him and said:

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I believe this is Mr. Con Dobson."

The fellow stared at the detective calmly for a moment, and then replied:

"Why, yes, that is my name, but you have the advantage of me, for I don't know who the deuce you are."

"Oh, like yourself, I have a number of names. Sometimes it is Jones and sometimes Robinson, according to circumstances. Your name, by the way, is sometimes David Fielding, I believe?"

"David Fielding?" said the fellow. "I never heard of the name. You are mistaken, sir. All these gentlemen know me."

"You do not sometimes live in New York, then?" pursued the detective.

"Never saw New York in my life. Ask the saloon-keeper here. He knows me. Mike," he called, turning to the mixer behind the bar, "did you ever hear of me being called anything but Con Dobson?"

"Noak; 'cept when der chap called yer a liar t'other night," replied the barkeeper, with a coarse chuckle.

"Don't get funny," growled the other, sulkily. "I mean that you never heard of me being called Fielding, or anything like that?"

"No, I never heard you called Fielding, Con."

"Of course not, nor nobody else. So, stranger, I hope you're satisfied."

"Far from it," rejoined the other. "I have a warrant for David Fielding, and you suit the description of that man to the letter."

"What! Do you arrest me?"

"That is what I propose to do, unless you can give conclusive proof that you are not the man I am after."

By this time the inmates of the place, including the barkeeper, the proprietor and a crowd of loungers, had collected about the bar.

"Ask any of these gentlemen," pleaded the man. "They are all neighbors of mine, and most of them have known me for a good many years."

"And none on 'em never knowed no good o' yer, Con," piped in one.

"'Cept to put away tanglefoot," added another.

"An' free lunch," supplemented a third.

"Gentlemen," broke in the detective, "I hold a warrant for a crook who is the very image of this man, only the person I want bears the name, in New York, of David Fielding. Now, what do you know of this individual? What kind of a reputation does he bear? Does he pass among you as an honest man, and does he remain here in your town 'he year round, or is he known to be absent a part of the time?"

The men looked at one another, and it was evident at once that the detective's question was not well received.

At length one of the gang growled:

"What's yer warrant for?"

"The warrant charges the man with the burglary of a jewelry store in New York city," returned Hunter, producing the writ.

"W'en did d'is happen?" demanded the proprietor of the saloon.

"About two weeks ago."

The saloon-keeper looked about at the crowd, and finally inquired:

"Has anybody missed Con wi'din' d'e las' two weeks?"

There was a general shaking of heads, accompanied by groans which seemed to indicate the negative.

"D'at's w'ot I t'ought," muttered the saloon-keeper. "I reckon ye're on de wrong lay, young feller, an' de bes' t'ing youse kin do is ter mosey. See?"

And before either Hunter or Billy was aware of the intention of the roughs, one of the toughest of them made a pass at the detective's head with his fist.

Hunter succeeded in dodging it, and the next instant the fellow went down in a heap by a blow from Billy's steel-muscled fist.

This set the fight fairly going, and for several minutes the man and the boy had

all htey wanted to do to keep the infuriated mob of ruffians at bay.

And in doing so more than one of the would-be pugilists were tumbled into the sawdust.

Finally it became so hot—there being at least twenty against the two—that our friends were forced to draw their revolvers.

This caused a general panic and stampede among the toughs, and in the excitement Fielding effected his escape.

Hunter and Billy then withdrew, as it was necessary for the latter to get back to the circus for the evening's performance.

As they walked back toward the tent Billy said:

"In my opinion we're on the wrong track, sir."

"How so?" queried the detective.

"That fellow we saw in the saloon is not the same chap I first spotted from the ring."

The detective looked at the boy with an expression of mingled amusement and incredulity, but answered:

"Well, my boy, if you're sure of it, that settles it; but I suppose you don't mind telling me, by way of a pointer, how you know?"

"Certainly not. You remember the fellow I pointed out to you had a long mustache and a pointed beard?"

"Yes, and so has this man."

"All right. That is just the point I'm coming at. If this fellow we have just seen had had a clean face I shouldn't have wondered at it, for, if everything else corresponded, I should have said that he was disguised. But, as the resemblance to the other man was so strong in nearly every other respect, and the beards being the same, I was impelled to study him more closely than I usually do any one, and I made two discoveries. One was that the beard of the man whom I saw in the circus was slightly reddish, and fresh-looking, like that of a young man; while this fellow's beard has a dead appearance, as if it had been gray and dyed. I noticed the first man's beard particularly, because the sun was shining on it, and it glistened like threads of old gold."

"That is a good point," declared the older detective, "and one worthy of a man of much riper experience; but you said just now that you made two discoveries. What was the other one?"

"The other was—but you will probably laugh at this theory," hesitated the boy, blushing.

"Not a bit of it, my boy. There is nothing too trivial for the observation of the true detective. What was the other discovery?"

"That pertained to the beard, too, but in a different way. The man I saw in the circus appeared to be extremely careful of his beard, and every time he expectorated he grasped it and pulled it out of the way, while the fellow in the saloon squirted his tobacco juice at random, without reference to his whiskers."

"By George, my boy!" ejaculated Captain Hunter, "this is better still. This is worthy of the oldest heads among us. A man may change or cut off his beard for the purpose of disguise, but he can never change his habits on short notice. I am convinced that, if you are positive in these matters, your theory of it not being the same man is the correct one."

By this time they had reached the circus tent, and Billy asked:

"Will you come in, captain?"

"Not just now. I want to make a few inquiries about this Con Dobson and see if I can locate him, and if I get through in time I shall call in later. In the mean

time keep your eyes peeled for our man in the audience."

And the two friends parted.

Billy was one of the procession of gayly-dressed ladies and gentlemen that rode into the ring to the bewildering strains of the band.

To all appearance he was as oblivious of surroundings as any of the rest of the procession, who rode with as much indifference as so many wax figures; but, all the same, the boy's eyes were not for an instant idle, and, without appearing to do so, were busily engaged in scanning the tiers of faces that rose on every side as the grand cavalcade moved around the ring.

Then came the regular performance—the lady "pad rider," the ground and lofty tumbling, the mildewed jokes of the clown, and finally the delight of the boys as well as the older people, Bareback Billy on his hoydenish claybank pony Charley-boy.

The usual deafening applause and screams of delight greeted the really wonderful performer, and no one watching his feats, would have suspected where his mind was for the most part.

But had they noticed a tawny-bearded man on one of the upper seats, who sat watching the performance, and seen how the boy's eyes reverted continually to that point of the assemblage, they would at least have suspected that there was something in the wind.

CHAPTER V.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

Spurred to his greatest effort by the wildly enthusiastic reception of every successive feat, and with his mind half-divided between his work and the interesting individual on the top seat, Billy, for once in his life, to some extent, lost his head.

The night was excessively hot, and before he had half finished his turn, both himself and his pony were reeking with perspiration.

At length came his grandest feat, and the one that was to finish the performance, a double back summerset, lighting on the pony's crupper with one foot.

His preceding acts had already worked the audience up to a state of excitement bordering on frenzy, and they waited with bated breath and throbbing hearts the final great feat.

In his own excitement Billy had neglected to take his customary brief breathing spell before attempting the double vault, and attempted the arduous performance without a moment's rest.

At the appointed moment, which was announced by a blare of the big horns and a crash on the bass drum, Billy threw himself into the air like a great flexible rubber doll, flopped over twice, and descended feet foremost toward the pony's rump.

His foot touched the reeking pony at the very extremity of his body, but, unlike every previous execution of the feat, his foothold proved insecure, slipped from the greasy coat of the pony, and the rider was precipitated headlong over the ropes forming the ring and into the midst of the audience.

The greatest excitement prevailed.

The crowd pushed forward to ascertain what damage had been done, so that it required the combined efforts of half the troupe of showmen to keep them back and prevent them from smothering the unfortunate rider.

Meanwhile, Billy had regained his feet.

It was difficult to tell whether he was very badly hurt or not.

His head had struck the edge of one of the seats, and the blood was flowing over

his face, but he bravely refused all assistance, declared that he was not hurt, and strode proudly out of the big tent into the dressing-room.

Here he washed the blood away, and when a doctor had stuck a few inches of plaster over various parts of his forehead and head, the dauntless young rider declared himself to be worth a dozen dead men.

Having finished his work for the evening, and having nothing more to do until the close of the performance, when the tent would be pulled down and the troupe would take the train for the next town, Billy accepted an invitation from Hunter to go for a short walk.

"Well, our man was on hand, as usual," observed the boy, when they had got a little way from the tent.

"Are you sure?"

"As sure as I am that he was there this afternoon."

"Then your theory that there are two of them is correct, and our principal work is going to be to find out which one, if either, is the right one."

"What did you learn about Dobson?" inquired Billy.

"I learned enough to substantiate the accusations made by some of his pals in the saloon this afternoon, to the effect that Dobson's central aim in life is to consume whisky and free lunches."

"Did you discover whether he was believed to be connected with any really vicious exploits or not?"

"Yes. Nobody seemed to give him credit for anything very bad. They seemed to think that he was too lazy for anything very vicious."

"How about his being absent from the town?"

"That is the clinching part of it. Some of them say that he is in the habit of disappearing from the town for long periods together, and others claim that not a day rolls around that he is not in some of his accustomed haunts."

"So that if either of the men is the one we are after, it must be the one I saw in the circus."

"There is no doubt of that."

"Did you succeed in learning anything about him?"

"Not a thing. Of course, all I had to go by was the resemblance between the two, and every one I asked if there was another man in town who resembled Con Dobson laughed and answered that he did not believe his like could be found on earth."

"It was unfortunate," Billy asserted, "that I met with that accident, for I had intended following the chap I saw in the audience and see where he went. That might have solved the whole problem."

"Yes, it was unfortunate all around. But who is this?"

The pair had stopped on the corner of the street, not far from the detective's hotel, and as Hunter spoke, a rather tough-looking young fellow had sauntered by for the second time, each time eyeing Billy with suspicious closeness.

Billy looked after the mysterious personage, who was at that moment walking away, and replied:

"If his guardian doesn't know him any better than I do, he's liable to go astray."

The stranger walked but a short distance, and then wheeled about and came back.

As the light of a neighboring street lamp fell on his face, Billy imagined that there was something familiar about it, and yet could not recollect where he had seen it before.

But as the fellow neared him this time, and saw that Billy was watching him, his features, which were very broad and

coarse, broke into a broad grin, and walking up to the rider, said:

"Hullo, Bareback! doncher know er feller? Say?"

Billy stared at the boy for a moment; then recognition came to him, and he exclaimed:

"Why, Mugsy Mullen, what are you doing away out here?"

"Ain't doin' nuttin', jes' now," replied the young stroller, with a suggestive shrug, "but I 'spect ter strike d'e show fer er job fakin'."

"Faking? Faking what?"

"Pink lemonade. See? D'e boss fakir's an old fr'en' o' me fadder's. D'ey yooster peddle soft-shells on er push-cart togedder, an' d'e bloke's promised me er job."

"That's good, Mugsy. Perhaps we can work together on a little deal I have on hand."

"W'ot, in der smeller line?"

"That's it, Mugsy."

"D'at's me hold, Bareback!" averred the boy, with a grin and a shrug. "W'ot's d'e lay?"

"I'll tell you that later on. Captain Hunter," pursued the rider, addressing the detective, who had stood an amused witness of the foregoing scene, "this is an old acquaintance of mine, Mugsy Mullen. Mugsy is one of the keenest ferrets for a boy that I know of. More than one New York detective has owed his success in important cases to Mugsy, and he and I have worked together many a time in ferreting out some tangled case."

"Oh, w'ot t'll, Bareback?" demanded the boy, actually blushing at the compliment. "W'ot d'ye want er smear it onter er feller like d'at afore strangers fer? I ain't never done nuttin' wort' nuttin'. See?"

"Ah, but you must let me be the judge, Mugsy! I say yes!"

"And if Billy says so, it is so, I'm positive," interposed Hunter, taking the boy's hand. "Mr. Mugsy, I'm delighted to know you."

"Mr. Mugsy! Hully chee!" giggled the boy, talking behind the back of his hand at Billy. "Who'd t'ink I'd 'a' lef' der Bow'ry ter come 'way out here in d'e woolly ter be called Mister Mugsy? I wondeh how long afore d'ey'll be callin' me kunnell?"

Billy laughed heartily, and then to the detective, to whom this was all blind mystery, he explained:

"You made a slight mistake, captain. My friend's name is Mugsy Mullen, and when you wish to attach the mister, stick it on to the Mullen instead of the Mugsy. After all, though, I guess he would prefer being called plain Mugsy."

"D'at's right! No frills fer me, as d'e gent said w'en d'ey gived him giblet sauce w'id his frankfeters."

"Well, my boy," interjected Hunter, at this point, "it is about time for you to join your troupe, as I see they are getting the plunder to the depot. I shall probably join you in a day or so; but I want to remain here for a short time and see whether I cannot learn something of our man. Meanwhile, keep your eyes open for him, and if you see him, try and learn something about him."

"Yes, sir. But do you think it likely that he will follow the circus?"

"I have a theory that he will. In my opinion, he has some motive in remaining with the show. This is only theory, remember, and there may not be anything in it, but it is the only thing we have to work on at present. Good-by!"

"Good-by, captain."

"Say," growled Mugsy, as soon as the detective was beyond earshot, "ver say d'at d'at bloke's er detective? W'y, say, he couldn't dertec' er trolley car if it runned over 'im. D'at's right."

CHAPTER VI.
ON THE ROAD.

Billy and his quaint friend hurried away to the depot, and arrived none too soon.

Nearly everything had been got aboard and a few minutes later the train pulled out.

But Mugsy had had the opportunity in the mean time of seeing the boss fakir and to perfect his arrangements with that gentleman to go along as a vender of "pink lemonade," as he had described it, and the boy rejoined his friend, the bareback rider, in a very happy frame of mind.

"It's all right, Bareback!" he chuckled, as he crawled into a seat beside Billy; "I'm ter swing d'e circle w'd the pink-un's fer d'e whiskers w'ot comes ter d'e show an' pick up d'eir nicks. Now, w'ot's d'e Hawkshaw lay?"

Billy explained that a robbery had been committed in New York a short time before—that Captain Hunter, the man they had left at the last town, had been detailed on the case, and had, as he supposed, traced his man as far as Big Rapids, and asked him (Billy) to assist him.

"An' ye've already sighted d'e bloke?" interrupted Mugsy.

"Yes, at least I have sighted a man who resembles the picture the detective sent me to identify him by."

"W'ot's d'e smeller—w'ot's his name—Finder—?"

"Hunter."

"Hunteh? Huh! d'at's a holy name fer a 'tective," laughed Mugsy, "'specially a would-be like d'at rooster. But w'ot I was about to perpound wos, did yer put his topknots onter d'e prig?"

"Yes, I pointed him out to the captain."

"An' what did his nupshels do?"

"He shadowed the fellow until the latter gave him the slip."

Mugsy laughed immoderately.

"Jes' w'ot I t'ought. Say, d'at seabiskit couldn't foller er milk-cart w'dout gittin' lost."

Billy was forced to laugh at the fellow's drollery, and then asked in a more serious tone:

"I say, Mugsy, what do you see about this detective that gives you sich a dislike for him?"

"Oh, I don't see nuttin' 'bout him ter dislike," gunted Mugsy, with a chuckle; "d'ey ain't nuttin' to see; nuttin' ter like or dislike. He's like one o' d'em veal san-wiches w'ot d'ey give yer at d'e penny eatin' house; d'ey ain' nel'der color nur tas', an' if ye shet ye'r eyes w'en ye'r eatin' it, yer couldn't tell but w'ot yer wos chawin' moonshine."

"The captain doesn't impress you as a brilliant detective, then?" laughed Billy.

"Oh, yes; he's a good un' for a crook ter have fun w'd! If I was er crook I'd hire d'at bloke ter kill time w'd w'en t'ings wos dull, 'stead o' playin' sol'taire. He'd make er good subjec' fer a 'prentice pickpocket ter practice on."

"You think you could do better yourself, no doubt."

"Ef I couldn't I'd sell meself ter er scrub-woman ter wash winders w'd. But say, Bareback," he broke off, suddenly, "w'ot's d'e divvy in d'is camp meetin' s'posen we plug der metal-man?"

"There is a reward of ten thousand dollars offered, I believe."

"Ten t'ousan' plunks, eh? Oh! say, jes' let me git me fins onter d'at once! Won't I mosey back an' make d'e boys on d'e Bow'ry sick? Say, I'd have d'e stripedest suit yer kin buy on the street an' er blazer as big as er trolley-lamp. But w're do youse come in, Bareback?"

"There was nothing said 'about my share," returned Billy, somewhat humbly at the recollection of his lack of forethought. "I presume Captain Hunter will do the right thing, however."

"Oh, youse is a prime chump, an' no mistake!" sneered Mugsy. "D'ye t'ink I'd go inter a deal like d'at? Not on ye'r tin-type. Say, I've got er bite."

"What is it, Mugsy?"

"Say, we let d'e would-be float, an' tackle to on our own hook? In my 'pinion, if d'e prig's ever pinched it'll be me'n youse d'at'll do d'e twistin', an' w'ot's d'e use o' divvyin' w'd er Hawkshaw w'ot don't do nuttin' but look on, like er blind man at er squintin' match?"

"That would hardly be the right thing," observed Billy, with some compunction of conscience. "You see, I should have known nothing about this case if he hadn't put me on to it."

"Well, d'en, if ye'r consence gripes yer say we square w'd his joblots by dealin' him a cool t'ousand? D'at orter satisfy anybody w'ot don't do nuttin', an' if he kicks at d'at, we'll penshun him off w'd cold clam-shells."

After a little more conversation Billy asked:

"What ever brought you out into this country, Mugsy, anyway?"

"Me? Oh, I fergot ter tell yer d'at. Yer couldn't guess in er week w'ot brought me out here."

"I'm sure of it," rejoined Billy, impatiently. "What was it?"

"W'y, yer see d'er' was a doctor chap w'ot sold cure-all on der Bow'ry; he called it 'Zooloo Corgel!' an' he had me ter dress up as er Zooloo ter draw custom. Well, t'ings went on all right for a w'ile, till one day er drunken bloke run ag'n' d'e box I was standin' on an' trun me down under er sprinklin' cart, an' d'e water f'om d'e cart washed d'e paint off me mug. D'en d'e cops 'rested d'e doctor fer a fake. But he wos er cute duck an' soon got out, an' d'en he purposed d'at we come out in der wild an' wooly, w're d'e cops wasn't so pertickler but w'en we struck Detroit, his medicine bottles run ag'in' a jag an' got locked up as er vag, so I struck fer d'e bush, an' here I am."

The boys soon ceased talking, and dropped off to sleep and did not awake until they were routed out at the station where they were to stop off.

It was about the middle of the forenoon when they reached the hotel in the modest town of West Chockywocky, so that by the time they had got breakfast it was time for Billy to join the street parade and Mugsy to mount up behind an improvised stand and begin the sale of slop drink to the hayseeds who had already begun to swarm about the tent where the great circus was to take place.

"Right d'is way, gents!" yelled the late Bowerylfe; "here's y'er ice-col' lemonade, w'd er ripe cherry in every glass! Come right erlong! On'y five cents er glass, an' it won't nel'der break nur 'toxicate; it'll leave ye'r head as clean as er widder's nightcap. Come right erlong."

In the course of time the parade returned to the big tent and the showmen prepared for the grand entry.

Mugsy still continued to hawk lemonade outside until the audience were all inside the tent; then he went in to prepare for the sale on the seats.

Billy, on the look-out for his friend, as soon as he caught sight of him, beckoned to him.

Taking the photograph of Fielding from his pocket, Billy said:

"Take a good look at that, Mugsy, and keep the image of it well in mind, and if you see anybody on the seats who resembles it, keep him in view until the

performance ends; then shadow him and see where he goes."

"I'll do it," assured Mugsy, after taking a long look at the picture. "Say, I've spotted d'at mug afore, sommers, an' yer kin bet ye'r mudder's close-pins I ain't ergoin' ter forgit it."

A little while later Mugsy was making the circuit of the seats with a tin basket filled with brimming glasses of very pink and very weak lemonade.

His voice rose above everything, the shouts of the boys, the thunders of the band and the stamping of feet, but his eyes were busy only in one direction, and that was in the search for a face that fitted the photograph which Billy had shown him.

But, strange to say, after half a dozen rounds, he was obliged to confess to himself that he had failed to discover a face which bore the slightest resemblance to the one in question.

It was therefore with a fainter heart than was usual with Mugsy that he started upon another round after having replenished his empty umblers.

By the time he had made half of this circuit there came an unusually thunderous outburst of applause, and a glance in the direction of the ring-entrance explained the cause of the demonstration.

Billy had just dashed in on the famous Charleyboy, and the audience, especially the boy part of it, were simply going wild in consequence.

As Billy circled around the ring, standing erect and motionless, with his arms crossed over his breast, Mugsy could see that his friend's eyes were carefully skimming the tiers of faces which uprose about him.

The refreshment vender paused in his vocation to watch the rider's action for the space of a minute; then he saw a strange expression flash across his countenance, and, following Billy's eyes, Mugsy saw what he had overlooked before, and wondered how he could have been so stupid.

Sitting away up, almost to the roof of the big tent, was a man, who, the lemonade vender perceived at a glance, was none other than the original of the photograph which had been shown him.

His heart came into his mouth at this discovery, but he calmed himself as best he could, resumed the crying of his lemonade, and pushed his way slowly up through the crowd in the direction of the individual on the top seat.

Another minute or two and he was alongside of his man.

"Lemonade, boss?" asked the boy, pushing his basket toward the man.

CHAPTER VII.

A TOUGH CUSTOMER.

The man paid not the slightest attention to Mugsy's appeal, and sat stolidly gazing at the evolutions of the wonderful bareback rider, with a faraway look in his eyes.

"Perdijjus ac', d'at, boss," commented Mugsy, by way of cultivating acquaintance with the strange man. "Bright kid d'at. Knocks d'e socks offen Queen Victory as er high an' lofty. Lemonade, sir? D'at cove's ekal ain't ter be foun', see, in dis neck o' de woods. B'in offered fifty t'ousan' an' keep ter cross der oshun an' play afore Emperor Bill, o' Germany, an' wouldn't tech it. Lemonade, boss?"

For the first time the stranger lifted his eyes languidly to the face of the persistent lad, evidently curious to see what such an interminable linguist looked like.

But if he had been surprised or amused at the boy's harangue, he was doubly so at sight of the young man.

Mugsy was a typical East Sider.

He was short, stockily built, with a thick neck, a round head, covered with a close-cropped suit of rusty-red hair, a broad and florid face plentifully sprinkled with coffee-colored freckles, a nose of the most pronounced pug order, a wide mouth, square jaws and protruding chin, which, with the addition of a pair of small, impudent, pale eyes, gave his profile very much the appearance of that of a bulldog.

Mugsy was attired in the loudest of loud check suits, now somewhat soiled and travel-stained, and his head was surmounted with a high white hat, very much soiled and battered, and encircled with a black band. The hat was worn very much on one side of the young Boweryite's head.

The stranger eyed the young man with a comical half-smile for a moment, and then exclaimed:

"Hello, Hester Street, what are you doing out in these parts?"

Mugsy didn't take kindly to the discourteous allusion; but, instead of retorting, utterly ignored it, and with a haughty toss of the head, observed:

"I sh'ud tink ye'd wanten purchis a snifter o' d'e ice-col' ter cool ye'r coppers, boss. Ye'r liver'll dry up breadin' d'at onlubrycatid atmospeer. D'at's right. W'y, der yer know, d'ere wos a feller back at d'e town we jes' lef' w'ot got so dry, an' wos too mortal stingy ter buy a ice-col', an' d'en w'en he went ter coff he set his w'iskers on fire? Dat's right."

"Well, for fear that I might meet with the same fate," laughed the stranger, "I think I shall invest in a glass of your wonderful 'ice-cold,' as you call it."

"Here ye air, sir," and Mugsy, lifting a glass of the pink lemonade from the basket, handed it to the man. "D'at'll 'frigerate yer clean down to ye'r heels, cure ye'r bunions, an' put er stop ter ye'r ingrowin' nails. Who's d'e nex'?" he went on, after returning the glass to its place and pocketing the change. "Jes' a few more glasses o' d'e coolin' bev'rige lef'! Who want's it?"

And Mugsy passed on; but he had taken a mental photograph of the stranger so that he would know him again in any place or under any circumstances.

Nevertheless, the lemonader still kept the stranger under surveillance during the rest of the performance, and at its conclusion took the liberty of slipping out and leaving his outfit with his boss, was in time to catch sight of the stranger again before he had escaped from the tent.

Having him in sight, he proceeded to shadow him as he left the pavilion, the stranger having passed just ahead of him, he was overtaken by Billy, who touched him on the shoulder and whispered:

"What luck, Mugsy?"

Mugsy made no audible reply, but jerked his thumb in the direction of the man ahead of them.

"On his track, eh?" whispered Billy.

"Yep; but keep dozey!" was the muttered response.

And the two boys followed.

Billy's mind was in something of a tangle with regard to this suspect. In the first place, he could not imagine what was the fellow's motive for following the circus so persistently.

And then it began to dawn upon him that the man might be a pickpocket, and determined to watch the papers and see whether any one had lost a pocketbook or not.

The boys had not far to follow, for the shadowed man only went as far as one of the hotels.

There, nodding to the clerk familiarly, he passed through the office, paused long enough to get his keys, inquire if there

was any mail for him, and went straight on, presumably to his room.

Billy and his friend were at a standstill. Neither could think what was the best to be done next.

In his dilemma Billy strode up to the desk and began to examine the register.

He passed his finger down along the names of the arrivals for that day in the hope of finding the name of Fielding, but it was not there.

Then he examined the list for the day before, although he knew that the man was in Big Rapids on the previous day, and of course he met with disappointment in this case, also.

Finally he plucked up courage to speak to the clerk.

"Excuse me, sir," he said, in a timid voice, "but what is the name of the gentleman who just passed up? His face is very familiar to me, and I think I know him."

"His name is there on the register," returned the clerk, indifferently. "Room 16."

Billy ran his finger down over the room-numbers, came to sixteen, and traced it across to the name corresponding with it.

"Ferguson, Alexander, Grand Rapids," he read.

"Is that your man?" inquired the clerk, with a little more show of animation.

"I'm afraid not," replied Billy, doubtfully. "Unless—"

"Unless what?" asked the clerk, as the boy hesitated. "Unless he has changed his name, eh?" laughed the clerk.

"Yes, sir," returned Billy, frankly.

"I guess there is not much likelihood of that."

"I suppose not."

"I dun'no 'bout d'at," put in Mugsy. "If I ain't mighty mistaken I've seen d'at mug 'in d'e Bowery, Noo York."

The clerk looked at the boy and smiled incredulously.

"What makes you think so?" he asked.

"'Cause d'ere never wos two mugs so much alike as d'em two, see?"

At that moment a man approached the counter and began looking over the register.

Neither Billy nor Mugsy paid enough attention to him to see who he was until he spoke.

After scanning the fresh arrivals and apparently not finding what he was looking for, the new-comer asked:

"Is there a man stopping here by the name of Fielding, clerk?"

Both boys looked up instantly. The new-comer was Hunter, the detective!

"The name of every guest in this house is on that register, sir," replied the clerk, wearily. "When did your man arrive?"

"He must have arrived to-day."

"Well, then his name should be among to-day's arrivals, otherwise he is not stopping here."

"I am sorry to disagree with you, sir," said the detective, tartly, "but I have good reason for believing that the man I desire to see is stopping in this house. The fellow may have changed his name, or his face, for aught I know, but that he is stopping here I am quite positive."

The clerk was growing nervous.

He instinctively glanced at the two boys who had also been inquiring for a man with an altered name, and the clerk began to suspect that something was wrong.

"The chap I mean," pursued the detective, excitedly, putting his hand into his breast pocket, "looks like—no, by jingo! haven't got it now. I was sure—"

At that moment his eyes fell upon Billy and his partner.

"Hullo!" he cried. "You here, my boys? Well, this is lucky! You have that photo, Billy? Let us have it."

Billy drew forth the picture and handed it to the detective, who in turn passed it to the clerk.

"That's the duck," observed Hunter, with a sigh of satisfaction. "Have you remarked any one who resembles that picture, sir?"

The clerk's countenance changed. He grew a trifle pale as he scanned the photograph, and finally replied, as he returned the picture:

"Yes, that party is here, I think."

And, whirling the register around so that he could read the entries right-side up, ran his finger over the names, and finally remarked, pointing to a name:

"Ferguson, Alexander, room 16."

CHAPTER VIII.

OFF THE SCENT.

Hunter took a card from his pocket, and, handing it to the clerk, requested:

"Will you kindly send this card up to the gentleman in sixteen?"

"Front!" bawled the clerk.

And when a spindle-shanked youngster of ten or thereabout put in an appearance the clerk gave him the detective's card with the directions:

"Room sixteen. Wait!"

And they did wait, but only for a short period, for soon the spindle-shanked boy reported that the gentleman in No. 16 would see "Mr. Spalding," that supposable being the name sent up by the acute Hunter.

So the detective turned to Billy and said:

"Remain here, my boy, while I go up and interview our friend."

The two boys seated themselves to wait the result of the detective's interview with the alleged crook, but much to Mugsy's disgust and distrust.

"Say, d'at feller makes me sick," observed the Bowery scion, as soon as the detective was gone. "He'd make er good nigger ter chuck balls at fer d'e see-gars, see?"

The detective had proceeded to the room of the alleged burglar, by whom, to his surprise, he was cordially received, and in a few minutes' time was in easy converse with the presumed crook.

"You will pardon me, Mr. Ferguson," began the detective, "but I have called upon you on a somewhat delicate mission."

"Yes," said the other, in a good-natured tone.

"To come to the point," proceeded the New York shadower, drawing the photograph from his pocket, "permit me to ask you, first of all, if that is a likeness of yourself."

The stranger took the photograph, and, scanning it carefully, remarked:

"It certainly resembles me, but it was never taken from my features. I was in New York city but once in my life, then only for a short time, and am quite positive I did not have my picture taken."

The detective was somewhat disconcerted, but struck out in another direction.

"Did you ever know a man by the name of David Fielding?"

"Fielding? Yes, I have known some people of that name, one a preacher. And, yes—there was another David Fielding over in Oshkosh, who was a horse-doctor."

Evidently Hunter had been overmatched or was on the wrong trail. At last he decided to drop No. 16, and arose to leave.

"Sorry," continued the man. "If you were not in so much of a hurry I might recall other David Fieldings, and maybe some of them would fit your description."

"I hardly think so. Good afternoon, sir."

Hunter returned to the boys considerably crestfallen. His assurance had van-

ished, and he did not evince a desire to unvail his secrets to the disinterested clerk.

"His wire-edgedness has runned ag'in' sumpin' blunt," whispered Mugsy, whose plainly-expressed distrust had sensibly affected Billy's faith in Captain Hunter's detective prowess.

"What success, sir?" asked Billy.

The detective frowned.

"I succeeded in finding out that we have been making fobis of ourselves all this time," he answered, almost surlily.

"How making fools of ourselves?" queried Billy.

"Why, I mean that this is not the man we are after."

"Well, here's a go!" observed the young man from the Bowery.

"How did you make the discovery?" questioned Billy, earnestly.

"Simply by questioning the man. His story is as straight as a string; and I hadn't conversed with him two minutes before I was convinced that he was not the man. Why, this gentleman has been in New York but once in his life!"

"An' d'en went fer der 'spress purpos' o' havin' his purtygraff took, I reckon," suggested the disgusted Mugsy.

"This is most unfortunate," murmured Billy.

"Worse," put in Mugsy. "It's rough on rats."

"What is to be done, sir?" asked the young acrobat.

"I shall take the first train back to New York, and begin my work from that end of the line again. Nothing is to be gained by remaining here."

"On'y d'at d'e 'habitants o' d'e State'll sorely miss yer," insinuated Mugsy, with an impudent chuckle.

"See here, young man," snorted Hunter, "somebody will miss you in about a minute if I hear any more of your impudence!"

"Oh, go bathe ye'r w'iskers in Gowanus water an' give ye'r chin er rest!" sneered Mugsy.

Hunter bestowed a scowl on the boy, and seemed about to proceed to extremes with him, but thought better of the matter, knowing that further talk or trouble would attract attention. So, without even a good-by to Billy, he left the room and was seen no more, greatly to the circus rider's astonishment.

CHAPTER IX. THE NEW DEAL.

But there was consolation in the detective's absence, for, as he moved away, a large legal envelope had dropped from an inner pocket to the floor—a singular accident, seeing the importance of its contents to the officer. Billy picked it up.

Examining it hastily, the bareback rider concluded to ascertain its actual contents in order to decide if it were important enough to hunt up Captain Hunter again to restore what he had lost.

So, stepping to one side, he found the contents to consist of two documents—one a warrant for one David Fielding, and the other a detailed description of the various articles of jewelry alleged to have been stolen by said Fielding.

Billy, realizing the value of his find, restored the documents to the envelope and placed the package in his pocket.

If Captain Hunter really had abandoned the search, as he had announced he should do, and had returned to New York to begin over again, he could duplicate the documents if they were needed; while, if the two boys were to keep on the trail, which Billy still felt sure they had struck, the papers might be a great help. So he decided to make no effort then to discover the captain's whereabouts.

Further, he had decided to act on

Mugsy's advice—to "go it alone" in the search for the wanted crook, and so informed his friend and ally as they proceeded on their way to their own hotel.

"I have the necessary documents here," explained Billy, taking the envelope from his pocket, "to detain our man if we run across him, and he will be held by the sheriff of whatever county we happen to be in pending extradition papers from the governor to take him back to New York."

Mugsy looked at his companion with an expression of mingled awe and admiration.

"Say, Bareback," he muttered at last, "youse chins jes' like one o' them out-an'-out lawyer chaps. Youse is dead keen, youse is! I'm sumpin' on de knock-out, but w'en it comes ter gittin' right down ter inside t'ink business, w'y, youse jist grabs d'e brass ring ev'ry roun'. But, Hunter says d'is cove w'ot he went up ter interview ain't d'e huckleberry. D'en w'ot?"

"In my opinion, he is mistaken. This fellow, if he is the man we are after, is as cunning as Satan himself, and it is more than likely that he succeeded in pulling the wool over Hunter's eyes in such a way as to make him believe that he is not the man. Now, among these documents is a description of the articles stolen. Upon this description much depends. If we are lucky enough to run across the fellow again we must make his acquaintance, get on the good side of him, and find out what jewelry he has in his possession."

"Leave d'at ter me! I most made his 'quaintance ter-day; 'cos w'en I axed 'im ter purchis' some ice-col' an' set ter jolly-in' 'im a bit, d'e bloke turned onter me an' goes a-kiddin' yoors trooly. W'en a bloke does d'at, it's dead easy ter git on borryin' terms wi'd 'im."

The two boys went to their hotel and had dinner, after which they returned to the tent, one to dress for the performance and the other to begin the sale of cool beverages.

When it came Billy's time to execute his inimitable feat of horsemanship, his eyes scanned the seats as usual, but to his disappointment, his man was nowhere to be seen.

Nor was the case any different with regard to Mugsy in his rounds with the "ice-col'." He was equally watchful with his friend, but to no purpose. If the suspect was there, he was in a disguise so complete as to baffle the two boys.

As they had a few minutes to spare before the departure of the train, the boys hied them to the other hotel, where the man had been stopping, but were again baffled, being told that he had left that afternoon—before the evening performance of the circus.

The puzzling part of that news was that no train had left between the time of the commencement of the circus performance and the one at midnight, on which the company embarked for the next town, for, as the fellow was not on that train, he must have either left town by other means or still remained concealed in it.

The two chums, determined not to be hoodwinked, had made a dozen trips through the long train, examining the faces of all the passengers, but only in the end had to confess their defeat.

"I'm afeered d'e game's up wi'd us, Bareback," grumbled Mugsy, as the boys seated themselves in the train at last. "D'e cove's done his bizness ter d'e queen's tas', an' giv' us d'e go."

"I still think there is hope," answered Billy, cheerfully. "I have a theory that the fellow has some hidden motive for keeping with the circus, and I believe that we shall yet see a good deal of him. We have got to take our chances like every other detective, you know."

CHAPTER X.

A QUEER TRANSFORMATION.

The next town at which the circus stopped was Kalamazoo, a much more important place than either of the previous towns, and the boys expected fully that their man would be on hand for reasons best known to himself and most likely to use his light fingers in relieving men in the crowd of their watches—which happens at every performance; but as on the occasion of the previous town, they looked in vain for their man.

It was while Mugsy was passing his lemonade and keeping a sharp lookout for the crook at the same time that a comical incident occurred.

The day being excessively hot, and the crowd correspondingly dry, Mugsy and his associate vendors were kept busy in supplying their wants.

There was, of course, a large representation of the colored population, and, as everybody knows, the colored brother has a preternatural thirst for lemonade on a hot day.

Mugsy was hurriedly passing out the glasses, when another colored bevy, seated lower down, kept yelling for him to wait upon them.

"Lem'nade heah! lem'nade heah!" was the cry; which, not being heeded, a long, lank, colored gentleman arose, climbed up the steps, and, reaching out his long arm toward Mugsy, yelled:

"Heah, sar! Two glaws lem'nade!"

Mugsy placed a glass in each of the fellow's hands, and as the "gemman" turned to retrace his steps, he slipped, staggered, and the next thing to occur was a head-foremost plunge of the gallant down over the other "darks," spilling his two glasses of lemonade in every direction, amid shrieks, howls and execrations dire from a dozen throats.

Mugsy, surveying the ludicrous scene, called out:

"Say, me colored Apoller, does yer charge anything fer this double tumble act?" and went on about his work, leaving the "gemmen" to settle their difficulty in their own peculiar way—by a good deal of jaw.

No discovery did either boy make at that performance, so after the show they met to compare notes, and having a full hour to spare before returning to the tent, they decided to pay a visit to the various inns to discover if their man was at any of them or not.

In their search they took in all the hostleries, examining the registers of each, or, where there was no register, making inquiry.

At length they struck a "tavern," where it was not at all likely their man would stop, but so eager were the two searchers that they would not allow even this one to go unsearched.

For a wonder it possessed a register, and Billy at once scrutinized the arrivals, and almost immediately said:

"Here we have him, Mugsy!" and read from the register: "Fielding, Rev. D."

Mugsy scanned the record, and at length remarked:

"Well, I wondeh ef d'e bloke has tied er gospil tail ter his cognoman? He's 'bout d'e label of er chap ter do it, dough."

Inquiry was made and the information given that the gentleman probably was then in his room. "If you want to see him," added the clerk, "all you have to do is to travel right up one flight and knock at the first door on the right after you git to the head of the stairs. We keeps no call boy in this house, you see."

"All right," answered Billy, and the two boys proceeding up the stairway, found the door indicated.

Billy tapped gently, when a heavy foot-step was heard within, the door was flung open, and—a tall negro stood before them! in whom the lemonade dispenser recognized the identical colored gentleman who had met with the ludicrous mishap at the circus that afternoon.

Thinking that there might be some mistake, or that the negro was the servant of the person wanted, Billy asked:

"Is Mr. Fielding in?"

"He am, sah!" was the prompt reply. "Da's ma name!"

"I guess there is some mistake," faltered Billy; "the gentleman I wished to see is the Rev. Mr. Fielding."

"Yes, sah; da's me, sah!" responded the negro, smiling and bowing graciously. "Wha' jew want see me 'bout, sah?"

"No, it is a mistake," insisted Billy, backing off. "The party I want to see is a white man."

"Oh! wal, d'ar' hain't no white gen'leman o' ma name stoppin' at d'is house, an' no minis'teh o' d'e gospel o' d'at name in d'is town."

The negro closed the door, and when Billy turned to depart he found Mugsy leaning up against the wall, shaking with laughter.

"Say!" he said, as soon as he could get his breath, "who's d'e wors' chumps, me an' youse, or d'e detective?"

"It's a flip-up between us, I guess," laughed Billy.

"Anyway, d'ere wos more color ter our scheme."

"Yes, and the woods seem to be full of D. Fieldings out here," growled the bareback rider. "Come on. Let's go to supper."

CHAPTER XI.

SERIOUS BUSINESS.

Supper being over, the two "independents" started for the tent for the evening's work, and being a little late, took a short cut, leading through a collection of small, dilapidated shanties, occupied by the roughest characters in the town.

About the middle of this disreputable section they came upon a lot of tough-looking men standing beside one of the shanties, and as the boys approached they noticed that the men were eyeing them in what seemed to be a suspicious manner.

"Looks like Bow'ry boys," muttered Mugsy.

"Yes, and looks as if they might have it in for us," rejoined his friend.

The rider and plucky Mugsy walked straight forward without affecting to notice the ruffians; but when they came opposite the gang several of them stepped out and cut off their progress.

"Which way, gents?" demanded one of the toughs.

It was the Bowery Boy who answered: "We're on d'e way to er fun'ral; d'youse coves want go 'long?"

"Say, don't get gay!" warned the tough, squaring himself. "I might give ye a chance to go to a funeral without travelin' any funder. Who be you, I asks?"

"Me? Oh, I'm d'e feller w'or's d'e man-eater f'om Sluggins City. I chaws up er man ev'ry udder day; d'is is me day, an' I ain't chawed up nobody yit, so look out fer ye'rself."

The fellow seeing that nothing was to be gained by bluffing, proceeded to quick action. As the rest of the gang now crowded him forward, he struck viciously, not at the undismayed Mugsy, but at the bareback rider.

Billy, too much of an athlete to be caught by such clumsy tactics, dodged the blow and quickly "chipped in" with a stinger on the jaw of his assailant that sent him sprawling into the dirt.

This opened the ball in good earnest; the gang rushed upon the two young athletes in unguarded fashion; but to their sorrow, for such were the strength and science displayed by the two circus delegates that in less than a minute's time the gang, numbering ten or twelve, was completely routed and demoralized, escaping only with bruised faces and bloody noses, much to their own astonishment.

The boys proceeded on their way uninterrupted.

They were a little late for duty, but Mugsy squared matters with his boss by explaining:

"Yer see, d'ere was er gang o' hoodlums w'ot wanted lessons in d'e manly art, an' d'ey t'ought dey'd practice on your'n trooly, an' if d'e sergints o' d'is wooden village has more bizness d'an yoosyal, d'ey kin charge it up ter Mugsy, d'e slugger."

The boss could but laugh, and forgave the boy, who went on with his vending of weak lemonade, with a fake peel swimming on top.

As for Billy, his turn was not on for some time yet, and he had ample time to dress for his act.

Again the boys were disappointed by not seeing their man, although both strained their vision in every direction, and let no face in all the vast throng escape scrutiny; so both concluded that the game really was up—that the suspect had given up following the circus, and therefore might not be seen again.

But when the boys reached the depot after the performance, a surprise was in store for them.

The show had not been earning the money the management had anticipated, and had been running behind considerably in its expense account.

Billy and Mugsy had noticed that the "ghost" had failed to walk for some time past, but had accepted the agent's excuse that he had received instructions from the proprietor that the men were not to be paid off until the end of the month, and so had worried along with comparatively empty pockets, but cheerful hearts.

But when the two friends reached the depot it was to find that the sheriff had seized the whole show, tent, horses, wagons, costumes, baggage and everything.

Among the rest were Billy's and Mugsy's trunks, containing every stitch of clothing they possessed aside from what they then wore.

"Say," muttered Mugsy, "here's a purty go! Here's er chance ter start out on d'e free-an'-easy occypashun of er first class tramp. Sich is greatness!" he philosophied; "yisterday I was firs' lootenant of er 'freshment stan'; ter-day a pore out-cast, w'id er soiled collar, oncet turned."

CHAPTER XII.

FICKLE FORTUNE.

The debt for which the circus had been seized was too large to liquidate, and it being impossible on so short a notice to find security, all there was for it was to allow the sheriff's minions to take possession of the outfit, store the plunder in the first available warehouse, stable the horses, and await news from the proprietor, who was in Chicago with another branch of the circus, and who had been telegraphed to.

Meanwhile the performers, who, like Billy and Mugsy, had not received their salaries for so long that they were out of money, were in a sad plight; the men growled and swore; the women wept and scolded.

"Well, we're in a pretty fix, Mugsy," remarked Billy. "What's to be done?"

"W'ot's ter be done?" echoed the Bowery boy; "same's d'e cove w'en d'e hang-man kicked d'e scafful' f'om under 'im: hang onter w'ot we've got."

"Which is precious little at this stage of the game," observed his friend, dryly. "How much money have you, Mugsy?"

The Bowery boy scraped round through his pockets meditatively for some moments and then answered:

"W'y, Bareback, ef I had er quarter an' er half-dollar more'n I've got I'd have seventy-five cents. See?"

"Then what are we to do? We cannot stay here all night. We must have some place to sleep and money to buy a breakfast with in the morning."

Mugsy, regarding his friend with a quizzical expression, arawled:

"Youse er show actor, an' talkin' 'bout sum'mers to sleep an' er breakfas'? W'y I'm 'stonished at yer! D'e best actors in d'e country learns, w'en doin' de provinces, ter sleep leanin' up agin d'eir own shadder, an' d'en pick d'eir teet' for d'eir break-fas'."

"But some thing has got to be done, my friend. I wonder what the chances would be to hang up the landlord where we stopped to-day for a night's lodging and a breakfast in the morning?"

"More hen-yas t'ings has been perpytrated, as d'e lady said w'en she used d'e preacher's high hat ter set her hen in."

"Well, suppose we try it?"

"I'm ye'r doxy," returned Mugsy, rising. "D'ey cain't no more d'an kill us; buryin' wid'out er permit's perhibited by d'e law."

And so the two comrades started to leave the platform in search of a landlord who would trust them for a bed and breakfast pending the turn in the tide of fortune, but were just then confronted by two women members of the troupe, both crying.

"Oh, dear!" wailed one of them, a blonde maiden of fifty summers, who did the trapeze act under the name of Mlle. Blanca Corduzi, but whose family name was Mary Ann O'Sullivan; "oh, dear!" wailed this charming maiden, "what on airth air we t' do at all? Here Oi hov' an me evenin' dress, an' all me other close is locked w'id that hateful show's loogage!"

"Ye'r blamed lucky ter have ye'r evenin' dress w'id yer," remarked Mugsy, without a smile. "Ye'd be in a fine fix w'id ye'r mornin' gown on at d'is time o' night. Now, if I had me cutaway an' opery hat w'id me, I'd be purty comfor'ble; but seein' d'at I've on'y got me fateeg sweet, I'm 'streamly weary."

"But it's different with you, sor," pleaded the lady. "You're a man."

"I never denied it, mum, an' d'ere ain't er cove in d'is neck o' d'e woods d'at 'ud dare ter!"

"But you have money," wailed the cantatrice.

"Have I? Search me!" replied the boy.

"You must have," insisted the actress.

"Oh, d'at's dif'rent. I must have is anudder t'ing; but it's er case o' ground-hog. I mus' have it, 'cos d'ere's no meat."

And Mugsy descended one more step toward the ground.

"Will you—can you, go off like that, dear, dear young man, and leave a poor gyrl out here in the cold world an' penniless?" wept the wretched woman.

"Huh! ef yer call d'is er col' worl', w'id de' t'ermomyter up in der nineties, mum, w'ot would yer call er Jannywary bliz-zard?"

"But the mone-?" implored the lady.

"Oh, de money? Oh, yes, I fergot d'at. D'e fac' is, I clean fergot ter go ter bank d'is eve till d'e doors was shet, an' I reckon I'll have ter hock me own sparkler fer er hutch. W'y don't yer leave ye'r

diamonds wi'd ye'r uncle till d'e ghost walks, mum?"

"Diamonds! Talk to me of diamonds! There was a time—"

"I know," interrupted Mugsy, "d'ere wos er time w'en yer yoost trun diamon's as big as hen's aigs at d'e chickens, but d'em good ol' times has vanished sence ye'r mamma died an' yer went on d'e road ter do d'e gran' trolloaloo on d'e flyin' trapees, at er salary o' steen dollars per week—ter git. Ta, ta, birdie!"

"Oh, cruel, cruel man!" shrieked the lady.

"I say, me fairy," he called back, "yer might try d'e baggage truck fer a hutch; it's out er sight. Kinder slopes wi'd ye'r back like one o' d'em 'clinin' cheers. Yer wanter keep er sharp lookout fer de 'rival o' de first train, dough, er de baggage-smasher'll dump yer. Good-eve. Sweet dreams, as d'e lady said w'en she chlory-formed her hubby."

"Pernicious wretch!" hissed the lady.

"Say, it is sorter cruel, Bareback," observed the boy, as they walked along, "ter leave d'em pore widders out dere in d'e lonesome. No tellin' but d'ey may be orfins, too."

Billy laughed heartily, in spite of his hard luck.

"You're a corker, Mugsy," he said. "There is no such thing as depression in you."

"D'at's w'ot d'e gent said w'en d'e bung shot out an' h'isted 'im er couple er yards in d'e air. But w'ot's d'e use? We may live ter see tougher times d'an d'ese, as de mug said w'en he got a life sentence. If we don't succeed in techin' d'e host, well, d'en, we kin be free an' indypendent 'Mer-cyans an' sleep under d'e blue canypp, an' I defy d'e bloke ter pull d'at offen us."

They soon arrived at the hotel where they had taken dinner and supper, and, having so much of an acquaintance, thought best to try there first.

But when Billy explained their situation in the choicest terms and politest possible manner, the sleepy clerk opened one eye, looked the boys over, and growled:

"Any baggage?"

"I just informed you," rejoined Billy. "that our baggage was with the rest seized by the sheriff, who holds a claim against the circus company."

"Pay 'n 'dvance, then," muttered the clerk, sleepily.

"D'at's w'ot I t'ought," interposed Mugsy. "An' now, sence youse is so 'commodatin', I'd like ter submit er porpersishun ter yer. S'posen' we, jes' fer er joke, call d'e last end o' d'e week d'e first, an' pay d'en. Nex' Sunday's d'e first o' d'e week, an' we'll whack up d'en. W'ot d'ye say?"

The clerk eyed the young man with a contemptuous snarl for a moment, and then replied:

"Young man, you're too funny."

CHAPTER XIII.

FAILURE, BUT FUN.

It was with rather heavier hearts that the boys left the first hostelry than they had approached it.

And what was more discouraging was the fact that, this being the place where they had stopped and paid their money before, and were still refused, what might they expect at a totally strange place?

"Well, d'at wos er failure, any way, as d'e lady said w'en she tried ter make er decoy duck hatch aigs," mused the Bowery boy, as they walked away.

"And the worst of it is," rejoined Billy, despondently, "that that was probably, of all others, the only place we shall have the least ghost of a show."

"Well, d'ere's one consolation. None o' d'e odder places can be any worse, anyhow."

But Billy was in no humor for joking or appreciating jokes, and strode on in moody silence.

Very soon they came to another hotel, somewhat less pretentious than the last, so much so that the night clerk looked as if he might serve in the double capacity of clerk and porter.

In addition to his rough clothing, the absence of a coat and the presence of a very dirty shirt, the fellow was half-drunk and sound asleep in his chair.

"Well, here's a purty kittle o' fish, as d'e cook said w'en d'e butcher fetched 'er a basket o' snaikes," observed Mugsy. "Pity ter sturb his peaceful dreams, I reckon."

"Yes, there is no use of waking the fellow, for, as you can see, or can smell, if you can't see, he is more than half-seas over, and would be ugly if awakened now, so that there is no chance for us here."

While Billy had been delivering this opinion Mugsy's eyes had been wandering about the dirty and ill-furnished office, and at last they fell upon an alarm clock hanging just inside the counter and almost directly over the head of the sleeping clerk.

He noticed that the alarm hand was set for four o'clock, and readily guessed that it had been set to wake the clerk on the arrival of some train which was due at that hour.

The boy quietly lifted the clock from its peg and proceeded to move the alarm round to eleven, it then being about five minutes to that hour, and hung it back on the peg.

Billy smiled at his friend's manoeuvre, but did not quite comprehend the drift of it.

Meanwhile Mugsy looked about the office still further, and at length came upon a long tin horn.

"Now, d'en," he whispered, "youse git outside o' d'e door an' be ready ter cut w'en der 'sploshun takes place."

Billy sidled out of the door and stood on the deserted sidewalk, and his action had not been a second too soon, for he had hardly passed through the door when the alarm clock went off with the most ear-splitting and nerve-starting clatter that ever issued from any invention of man or fiend.

At the same instant Mugsy put the tin horn to his lips and gave two or three long, roof-lifting blasts, and then, dropping the horn, stepped quietly out of the door.

"Not yit," he admonished, catching his companion by the sleeve, as he was about to make off. "Wait er minit till we ketch er glimpse of der fun."

But they had not to wait a minute, or scarcely a second.

With a yell equal to that of a wild Indian, the clerk sprang from his chair, stared with a bewildered expression at the clock, which was still clanging away like a boiler factory, and then in the direction of the door.

Then, all of a sudden, he appeared to collect his wits, and, grabbing a bundle of baggage from behind the counter, hastened to the door.

By this time the boys had moved along a short distance and stood concealed in the shadow of a sign.

The clerk soon appeared at the door, and the expression of surprise on his countenance.

He looked all around in a dazed sort of way, looked up the street and down the street and straight across the street, and finally muttered with fearful imprecations:

"Where in blazes did that 'bus go to so sudden?"

But the boys were too full of laughter to hazard waiting for any further developments, lest they might burst out and betray themselves.

"I s'pose d'at cove wonders w'ot makes it so dark at four o'clock," said Mugsy, when they were far enough away.

"I suppose he also wonders why the plaguey 'bus don't arrive from the depot," added Billy, laughing.

"But d'e funniest part of it is d'at d'e busman toots d'e horn w'en he drives up, an' as d'is rooster heard d'e horn, he's rackin' his pore t'ink-box ter know w'ere d'e blamed bus's dropped to. He'll be surchin' d'e cellar purty soon."

"Well, here is another 'joint,' as you would say," interrupted Billy, as they arrived in front of a quiet, neat little house with the sign "Hotel" over the sidewalk. "Shall we tackle it?"

"O' course. Never let er oppertunity pass, as d'e tramp said w'en he drank d'e 'monia w'ich wos in er beer bottle. Go in an' nit his ducklets in ye'r most dress-shoit fashion. An' d'en if youse fails, let ye'r 'umble servant have er whack at 'im."

When the boys got inside, they found a neat, but homely room, which had more the appearance of a farm-house sitting-room than the office of an inn.

A respectable old gentleman was sitting there in his shirt-sleeves reading a soiled newspaper, with his glasses on the very tip of his hospitable-looking nose.

He raised his eyes over his spectacles as the boys entered, and puckered his mouth, but said nothing.

Billy related their story in his usual polite manner, and the old gentleman listened attentively to the end, and then, after looking the boys over carefully, said:

"You don't look to me like tramps, and I don't believe you'd run off with any of my chickens if I let you stay. Do you say that there's a slight chance of your being able to pay me some time?"

"Oh, we'll pay you some time," replied Billy, earnestly, "if we have to go to work on a farm to earn the money. But I apprehend nothing so desperate as that. I anticipate that our proprietor will either come along some time to-morrow, or send the necessary money to relieve our temporary distress, and the first money we get you shall be paid."

"Spoken like a man," said the kindly old gentleman, "and I believe you. Come this way and I will show you to a room big enough for both of you."

With which he picked up a candlestick, lighted the candle at a gas-jet, and started toward the rear of the house.

"Stay!" he said, suddenly, stopping, "have you lads had supper?"

Billy informed him that they had, and the old gentleman resumed his course.

At the rear of the hall there was a short flight of steps that led to the floor above, and these the host mounted, and was closely followed by the two boys.

They were soon ushered into a very small and very stuffy room, the windows of which had not apparently been raised since the house had been built, but everything was clean, and that was much.

When the kindly host had bidden the boys good-night and the door was closed, Mugsy said:

"D'at's w'ot I call winnin' wi'dout playin' yer cards."

"What do you mean, Mugsy?" asked Billy, curiously.

"Youse worked d'e racket like er charm, wi'd ye'r lace-hankercher ellykence; whur'-as, ef I'd 'a' stuck me onvarnished nozzle inter de soup d'ere'd 'a' b'in er fermentation, an' his w'iskers'd 'a' got er sour stum-mick. But, say, d'is rume's like er pid-geon's nes' fer hotness an' feather-bed smell. Yer could hatch crockydiles in here. Lemme see if I cain't h'ist d'at win-der."

With that he walked to the window, and, seizing the sash, lifted till he saw stars,

but it was no go. The window would not budge.

"I wonder if d'ey didn't make d'is window firs', an' d'en buil' d'e shanty roun' it," he observed, spitting on his hands for another effort. "It's like liftin' er mortgage offen er saw-mill ter h'ist d'is peephole. Come, give us er lift, Bareback."

The two boys exerted their utmost efforts to raise the window, but without success.

The sash had become glued down by the various coats of paint, and was as firmly rooted in its place as if it had grown there.

"Oh, well, I s'pose we'll hafter grin an' bear it, as d'e allygator said w'en he got d'e lockjaw w'id his mout' wide open."

"Something like a 'Turkish bath, eh, Mugsy?"

"You bet. We'll 'semble d'em steamed-over biskits d'ey have in cheap bean'ries in d'e mornin'."

Nevertheless, in spite of the heat, so weary were the boys that they had scarcely more than touched the pillow before they were asleep.

Mugsy was the first to wake in the morning, and, rolling out of bed in a muck of perspiration, he examined himself critically, and then observed:

"Well, I've offen heerd tell o' d'e lux'ry o' feather beds, but 'atween de'm an' er wet biskit-pan fer sleepin' purposes, give me er hot grate over a puddin' fact'ry."

"What's the matter, Mugsy?" queried his friend, waking up.

"Oh, nuttin', on'y I was a-wonderin' wedder I was a roas' er a stew."

CHAPTER XIV.

IN A HOT BOX.

After the discomforts of the hot bedroom, it was a decided pleasure to come down into a cheery little dining-room to an excellent breakfast of fried spring chicken, trout fresh from the lake that morning, lettuce that had been growing in the garden half an hour before, and strawberries with the dew still on them.

The landlady was a sweet-faced, motherly old lady, and she was exceedingly kind to the boys.

"I hope you slept well last night," she said, in her gracious way.

"Very well, thank you," replied Billy.

"You had cover enough on your bed, I hope?"

"Oh, yes," said Billy, scarcely able to suppress his laughter.

"D'ere mighter b'in a comforter er two more," interposed Mugsy, with a serious face, "er mabby a sheepskin 'ud 'a' b'in d'e proper dinctum to increase d'e c'loric."

The landlady regarded the boy with a puzzled countenance for some seconds, and finally appeared to abandon the hopeless task of trying to unravel his meaning, and turned to Billy and asked him if he would have another cup of coffee.

In addition to the landlady and her husband and an old-maid daughter, there were four or five boarders at the table, dull, silent fellows, who put their faces down to within two inches of their plates, ate with their knives, and drank coffee out of their saucers with a hissing sound that reminded Mugsy of a sewer-pump.

There was also an elderly man, an invalid. There is always at least one invalid in all well-regulated country families, it seems.

This person was an uncle or something to Mrs. Hargrave, the landlady.

He had a very grave, disappointed countenance, and there was something about him that interested Mugsy at once.

Perhaps it was the number of hot biscuits he ate, for Mugsy had passed him the plate no less than ten times, and then

when the old chap asked the boy to pass it again he did so, with the observation:

"Youse is rudder fond of biskits, I take it?"

"Very—when they're good," returned the old man, splitting the hissing-hot edible open with his knife and spreading something less than a pound of butter on it.

"Well, how does d'ese strike yer, ol' feller?"

"These are not just what they ought to be," growled the invalid. "Scarcely enough short'in' in 'em."

"I noticed d'at yer didn't seem ter relish 'em like yer orter. I s'pose w'en d'ey're jes' d'e corree' kibosh yer kin stow away a couple o' bar'ls on 'em?"

"I can eat a good many," grinned the old chap, flattered at the compliment. "Although my appetite's nothin' to what it used to be."

Mugsy reflected a moment, meanwhile watching the invalid devour the indigestible food, and thought that he would like to match him against an ostrich, even money. At last he asked, innocently:

"Yer never tackled er Park Row sinker, did yer?"

"No, I don't think I ever did," returned the invalid, becoming interested. "Are they fine?"

"Fine? Fine ain't no name fer 'em! An' d'en d'eir' so useful in udder ways 'sides fer eatin'."

"Indeed? How is that?"

"W'y, yer see d'e winds in Noo York is somethin' dreadful. Sometimes folks is carried up to d'e tops o' d'e tallest buildin's, an' d'en carried out ter sea an' dropped."

"Is it possible?" gasped the invalid.

"Shure. But d'ere is w'ere d'e Park Row sinkers comes in."

"Yes?"

"Yep. Yer see on er windy day d'e chief injuneers of d'e bean'rys bakes up a extry supply o' sinkers an' ev'ry gent an' lady in town goes down an' fills d'eir-selves up on 'em. W'ot's d'e result? D'e wind blows an' howls, an' tears all d'eir close off, but it's no go, d'e folks d'eir-selves won't budge. D'e Park Row sinkers holds 'em down like er chooner loaded w'id pig-iron."

"This is most remarkable," gasped the invalid. "I wonder, though, if these biscuits are digestible?"

"D'at's d'eir on'y fault," returned Mugsy, with a serious face. "But it makes bizness good fer d'e dynamite manyfact'ors."

"How is that?" asked the man, greatly astonished.

"W'y, d'e on'y t'ing w'ot'll digest d'e sinkers is dynymite, so d'e manyfact'ors put d'eir stuff up in little capsules, ter be taken arter eatin', an' d'at does d'e work."

"You don't mean to tell me that they swallow the dreadful explosive?" exclaimed the invalid, with a horrified expression.

"Cert."

"This is most remarkable!"

"So 'tis; but d'e folks down d'ere don't mind it er little bit."

"But is there not some internal injury sustained by this dreadful practice?"

"Not a bit," replied Mugsy, coolly.

"Yer see, w'en d'e dynymite is swallowed, d'e capsules sticks in d'e sinkers like er blastin' shell in er rock, an' we'n d'e exploshun goes off d'e folks don't feel it."

After breakfast the boys paid a visit to the depot to ascertain whether anything had been heard from the proprietor of the circus or not.

Mr. Gossell, the manager, was there, and informed them that the proprietor had been heard from and would probably

be along about noon; that he would doubtless fix matters, when the boys would get their money.

This had the effect of cheering them up a good deal, and Mugsy proposed, as they had nothing else to do, that they go for a walk and search for adventures.

"For," observed the Bowery boy, "d'is is er sort of er sleep-an'-eat village, d'at 'minds er feller of his gran'mudder's funeral. I like sumpin' giddy an' gay, as d'e kid said w'en he put d'e wasp-nest in his pants pocket."

They walked about the town for some time without finding anything to interest them, and about noon, beginning to feel hungry, considered the possibility of being able to stand the good-natured landlord off for another meal.

"Oh, I t'ink it'll be all right," said Mugsy. "W'en a cove gives yer his coat it's a easy matter ter persuade him ter give ye his vest."

And so they started to retrace their steps in the direction of the inn.

They had gone but a little way, however, when, as they were passing a small restaurant, the neatness of the place attracted their attention, and induced them to stop and look in.

A good-natured, circular-faced individual stood at the door, and he appeared to be quite as much interested in the boys as they were in the restaurant.

"Good-day, gentlemen," he said. "A trifle warm."

"Yep," answered Mugsy, "but d'ere'll be snow afore mornin'."

"You joke," smiled the jolly restaurant-keeper.

"Not er bit on it. If youse'll take er short trip ter d'e Ricky Mount'ins ye'll see all d'e snow yer want."

This was an unusually stupid joke for Mugsy, but it struck the jolly man as excruciatingly funny, and he laughed till he shook his fat sides.

"It's easy seeing," he said, "that you're a showman. I kin allus tell 'em."

"No?" chuckled Mugsy. "Would yer, dough? How d'ye tell?"

"Oh, there's somethin' about a showman that's different from other men."

"I s'pose d'ere is, now. But w'ot sort of a actor would ye take me fer, fer instincts?"

"Oh, that's easy," laughed the fellow, confidently. "Anybody kin see that you're the funny clown."

"D'at's right. But, say; youse has some udder way o' tellin', ain't d'at right?"

"Only from instinct."

"Gee whizz!"

Then turning to Billy, he whispered:

"Who'd 'a' t'ought he could 'a' smelt d'em onions I et fer breakfas' yit?"

"The gentleman means that he had an intuition that you are a clown and a showman."

"Oh! Kinder feel it in his innerds, as a feeler feels a spell o' sickness comin' on?"

"Yes, anybody would know that you was a clown, an' a good one at that," interjected the restaurant man. "You can't help being funny if you try."

"D'at's right," said Mugsy, with great sobriety. "An' it's 'stressin' at times w'en I wanter be sober. Fer instincts, d'ere was w'en I went to me mudder's funeral. A feller orter be sober d'en, if ever, ain't d'at so?"

"Indeed he ought," returned the other, with a deep sigh.

"D'at's w'ot I said; but it was different w'id me. I tried w'id all me might ter be sober, but somehow d'ere was d'at funny streak struck me jes' as d'ey was lettin' d'e old lady down, an' I called out to der men w'ot was a-lettin' d'e coffin down ter be keerful o' d'e ol'

un's back as she never could stan' a sudden shock; not t'inkin' d'at I was a-sayin' anyt'ing funny, but d'at grave-digger sniggered right out an' let d'e rope slip outen his han' an' d'e ol' lady went down head firs'!"

CHAPTER XV.

A TURN IN THE TIDE.

The restaurant keeper laughed hilariously at Mugsy's droll speech, and said:

"That was very funny; but I can easily see that it was unintentional on your part, and that made it all the funnier. But you'll have to excuse me, gentlemen, I must look after these customers."

Two men had just passed into the restaurant at the moment.

"Good-day," said Mugsy.

"Good-day," returned the restaurant man.

"By d'e way," interjected the boy, "youse folks out here don't seem ter be up w'd d'e lates' fad."

"What is that?" asked the man, hesitating nervously.

"W'y, d'e worl' over, 'cept here in Kalamazoo, d'ere's a fad to 'vite showmen to eat. Not d'at we wanten eat—oh, no! I jes' mentioned d'e fac' in case yer wanted ter be up ter date. See? W'en me an' me fr'en' here goes ter Delmonico's d'ey never t'inks o' chargin' us anyt'ing; but we're too independent ter eat fer nuttin', so d'e way we gen'rally git eaven's to drop a fifty in our plates afore we goes."

The man looked at the boy quizzically for a moment, and then observed, dryly:

"Yes; but that game don't go in Kalamazoo."

And turning upon his heel he walked away, leaving the two aspirants for a free meal standing there.

"D'ere was a fine investment d'at didn't pan out, as d'e gent said w'en he bought d'e chiny aigs ter make er ou'let."

The boys, with a good deal of reluctance, therefore, returned to Mrs. Hargrave's boarding-house, where they had stopped over night, to try their luck there.

To their surprise and delight they were received with as much cordiality as if they had been regularly paying boarders.

After partaking of a hearty mid-day meal, the two boys started out to learn what had been done with regard to the affairs of the stranded circus.

"We should be very grateful to these people, Mugsy," remarked Billy, as they went along. "It is a great pleasure to find such generous, unselfish people when away from home like this."

"D'at's right," rejoined Mugsy, with a serious countenance. "It's like pickin' up manna in d'e street. But d'ese folks hasn't been in d'e bizness long. D'ey'll know better later on."

"What do you mean?"

"W'en one er two regular well-trained barnstomers strike d'eir joint an' do d'em up fer a week er two, an' d'en show d'eir gratytod by walkin' off w'd d'eir bed linen, d'ese folk's hearts 'll git as hard as pavin' stones, an' dey'll git ter chargin' guests fer usin' d'eir own quill toot-picks."

The boys learned where the manager was stopping and made their way to his hotel without delay.

The manager, Mr. Gogsell, informed them that the proprietor was in town, and that it was likely that he would fix things up so that the circus could proceed on its way.

"How 'bout sal'ries?" asked Mugsy.

"They will be paid all in good time," returned the manager.

"Er good time 'ud be right now," growled the boy.

"Oh, there is no hurry," said the other, carelessly. "You people are not suffering."

"Oh, o' course not. D'e on'y question w'd us is d'e interes' we're losin' on d'e money. As fer eatin', d'ere's no trouble 'bout livin' on d'e gen'rous atmos-speer like frogs."

The manager eyed the boy for a moment, and then said, sneeringly:

"Say, what do you people do with your money, anyway? You shouldn't be short."

"D'at's what I said. D'e trouble is d'at d'ere's no place ter invest our plunks out here."

The man reflected a moment, and then continued:

"You have enough to carry you over for the present, haven't you?"

"Nuff w'ot?"

"Money."

"Oh, I t'ought youse meant check. D'at's d'e on'y commodity we've got lef', an' dat'll be runnin' short purty soon if we don't git a lif'."

The manager put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a roll of bills and gave each of the boys a five-dollar bill.

"There," he said, "that ought to carry you along till the old man gets things settled."

"D'at's d'e stuff," chuckled Mugsy, as he stuffed the bill into his wach fob. "Er liver ain't much at er race, but it's a wad at er charity meetin'. T'anks, awful."

"Where is the proprietor stopping?" inquired Billy.

"He's stopping here; but he is out just now."

"How soon will he be back?"

"I have no idea. You couldn't see him, anyway, for he's going to be very busy, as he has to return to Chicago to-night."

However, the boys were pretty well contented with the little money which Mugsy's quaint eloquence had wormed out of the manager, and they started out for more adventure.

In the course of their loitering tour they came upon one of the actors who had been with the stranded circus.

He was a sword swallower, and his name was Signor Campabello.

He was rather past the age of usefulness in the show business, and had fallen into that sere stage of seediness peculiar to actors of a certain type.

"Well, boys, how are you making out?" he questioned, in a hoarse voice, which indicated that he had taken something besides water the previous night.

"Firs' class," answered Mugsy, cheerfully. "T'ings is swimmin', as d'e Mississippi farmer said w'en he seen his house floatin' away."

The actor glanced at the boy with an amused expression and said:

"You are facetious, lad."

"Oh, d'at's on 'count o' d'e wedder. In real col' wedder it turns ter noomony."

"Ah, my lad," sermonized the grave man, "your spirits are light. Your soul has never drunk the bitter hemlock of woe, as mine has, or you could not wear the motley and jingle your frivolous bells on all occasions. Your heart would bleed—bleed."

And the grave man struck a tragic attitude and thrust his hand in the bosom of his shabby Prince Albert.

"D'at depends," observed Mugsy.

"Anyway, if I was 'flicted d'at way I'd wear a liver-pad."

"You do not comprehend, ignorant youth. Thy soul is too flippant. You cannot plunge to the profound depths of philosophy and bring to light the shining treasures that lie hidden there."

"D'at's right," replied Mugsy, soberly.

"I never wos much on divin'. I plunged offen er dock in d'e Eas' River onct,

w'en d'e udder kids said d'ere was er trezur' at de' bottom, but d'e on'y t'ing I fetched ter light wos er broken beer-bottle an' er fruit can full o' sand."

"Thou deal'st in jests."

"Y'er dead wrong, covey. I ain't never sold nuttin' but ice col', 'cept w'en I uster help d'e ol' man w'en he wos a-peddlin' soft-shells in er push-cart."

Again the grave man stared at the imperturbable youth. At length he said, in even a graver tone than ever:

"Youth with the sparkling spirit, which knows no care, have you such a thing as filthy lucre about your person?"

"Meanin' dust, I reckon?"

"By the mean and vulgar sometimes so denominated."

"Well, I ain't quite broke," replied the boy, "t'anks to d'e gen'rossity of an angel we just met."

"Ah! then you are my jewel, my affinity, mine other self, lightsome youth! Would'st part with the paltry price of a glaws of beer?"

"Well, I don't drink meself, 'cept d'e ice-col', but seein' as ye'r coppers seems ter be hiss'n', I don't min' partin' w'd d'e price of er snifter, if ye'll wait till I git change."

"Never mind the change, my boy," said the man, with a watery mouth. "Give me the bill, and the publican will soon sever it into the required fractions."

Mugsy looked at the grave man and closed one eye.

"Say," he said, "w'ot d'yer take me fer? D'yer t'ink I lef' d'e festive Bow'ry ter come all d'er way out here ter git buh-coed? If yer wanten wet whistle, me fr'en', do so at ye'r own expense, er hang up d'e barkeep. Yer can't play me fer no Jersey Reuben jes' yet."

And, returning the bill to his pocket, he took Billy's arm, and the two boys resumed their walk.

"Say, w'ot fer er vinegar-john is d'at bloke, anyway?" he said, as they walked along. "He's got d'e mug an' gab of er gospil sharp, an' d'e liver of er green-goods man."

"But is neither," returned his friend. "He is simply one of those men who have been up in the world, and is down on his luck. He is reckless and wanting in manhood, and would not scruple at much to satisfy his beastly cravings."

Anyway, he couldn't work me fer no sucker."

"I didn't think he could. But I was watching, and if you had been foolish enough to have given him the bill I should have interfered."

"Still, I'd 'a' liked ter've give him er snifter, fer he looked jes' like me ol' dad w'en he'd been on er bender over night an' said his coppers wos hot in d'e mornin'."

The boys spent the better part of the afternoon in walking about and seeing whatever there was to be seen in the little city, and late in the day they again called at the hotel where the manager was stopping, and made inquiry as to the state of the business pertaining to the stranded show.

"Nothing new," sighed the manager, who seemed himself to be somewhat despondent by this time. "The proprietor has been trying to effect a settlement with his creditors, but they have arrived at no definite understanding yet."

"Is the proprietor going back to Chicago to-night?" asked Billy.

"He has already gone."

"Then what is going to be done?"

"I can't tell. If the creditors agree to his terms, they are to wire him, and the matter will be settled up."

"In d'e mean time me an' youse is ter live on d'e wild winds," observed Mugsy.

"There seems little hope of anything else just at present," responded the manager.

"Wot're ye a-goin' ter do, Bareback?" questioned the boy, as they walked away together.

"I know what I'm going to do," rejoined Billy, sternly. "That man owes me over two hundred dollars in salary, and I propose to see him if I have to walk to Chicago to do it."

"D'at's d'e stuff, an' I'm wi'd yer."

The boys returned to the boarding-house, and with less compunction this time, owing to the cordial welcome they had received before, and were kindly received again.

After supper Billy got into conversation with the landlord, and detailed the exact status of their affairs.

"Then there appears to be little chance of you ever receiving anything from these people?" said the kindly old gentleman.

Billy shuddered, for he expected that a negative reply on his part would result in himself and his friend being thrown out of the house.

Nevertheless, Billy was too honest a boy to dissemble, and replied:

"The only chance we have, it seems, is to see the proprietor. He is in Chicago."

"But is there any likelihood of his paying you if you should see him?"

"I can only hope that he would, sir."

"Um. How do you expect to get to Chicago, my boy? It is nearly two hundred miles from here."

"We have a little money," answered Billy, bravely, "and when that is gone, we can walk the rest of the way."

The old gentleman reflected a moment or two, and then said:

"No, that won't do. If you think you will be justified in making the trip I will furnish you the money for one of you to go, and the other can remain here till the one who goes comes back."

Billy was overwhelmed with gratitude at the generous offer, and it was agreed that he was to start the following morning.

While this interview was in progress Mugsy had paid a clandestine visit to the hotel where the manager was stopping, and came in just as the arrangement was concluded, and announced:

"Dere's no use goin' ter Chicago; d'e perpri'ter's here, an' he's d'e same bloke we was a-watchin' in d'e circus!"

CHAPTER XVI.

AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY.

Billy was so excited over the announcement made by Mugsy that he was unable to speak for a minute or two.

But at length he controlled his emotions enough to ask:

"Do you mean to say that the man we have been watching in the circus is the proprietor?"

"D'at's right, 'less d'ere's two on 'em dat looks erlike, an' d'at ain't likely."

"But the manager said he had gone to Chicago."

"W'ich goes ter show d'at d'e manager is likely ter pervarycate, 'cos' his niblets is right here."

"How did you happen to see him?"

"He was jes' a-goin' inter d'e hotel."

"Was he alone?"

"No; d'e manager wos wi'd 'im."

"And you think there can be no mistake about it?"

"No more'n I could be mistaken in me own 'flection in d'e lookin' glass."

"Did you learn whether he intended to leave to-night or not?"

"Yep; d'e manager said he wos a-goin' ter leave at midnight, he t'ought."

"Then I will have plenty of time," cried Billy, jumping up. "I must see him

before he goes, as it will save a trip to Chicago."

Then, turning to Mr. Hargrave, he said:

"This is better news, sir, than we had expected. It may not be necessary for us to go to Chicago after all."

"That is good, my boy," replied the old man. "But, remember, if it is necessary, the money is at your disposal."

"You are very kind, sir, and I can never thank you enough. But I hope that it will not be necessary to ask your generosity."

When the boys were outside, Mugsy asked:

"D'yer mean ter say d'at d'e ol' angel perposes ter give us d'e sand ter go ter She-cago?"

"Yes; he has very kindly offered to defray the expenses of one of us, if it becomes necessary to go."

"W'y, say, d'at ol' gent oughter have er crown!" declared the boy. "I t'ought d'ey'd quit makin' folks as good as d'at."

"It seems that there are a few left, Mugsy."

When they reached the hotel, at Billy's advice, Mugsy remained outside, while Billy went in to seek an interview with the proprietor of the circus.

He inquired at the desk whether Mr. Rawlding was in or not, guessing at that being the gentleman's name. To his surprise and delight he was informed that he was.

Billy went boldly about it, and sent up his card.

Here he was treated to a second surprise, for the boy came back to announce that Mr. Rawlding was in his room, and would see Mr. Bristol.

Billy was greatly pleased to find the gentleman alone, for he had feared that the manager would be with him, and that would have precluded the asking of certain questions which were in the young man's mind.

The proprietor sat at a table writing when Billy entered, and did not raise his head for a moment or two after the boy had got into the room.

Then, suddenly, he looked up, and the moment his eyes fell upon Billy, he said:

"Oh, it's the bareback rider! Do you know I have been racking my brain to make out who Mr. William Bristol was? Now, if you had had on your card just 'Bareback Billy,' I should have known who you were in a minute. You should have your cards printed in that way, my boy."

"I have some cards printed in that way," answered the boy, "but unfortunately they are at present in my trunk—"

"Ah, and that is with the other baggage which is tied up," interrupted the gentleman. "Well, we shall have all that out to-morrow."

"But, sit down, my boy. What can I do for you?"

It is needless to say that Billy had already recognized in the man the same that he had seen sitting on the seats at the circus, and he was at a loss to understand why the proprietor of a circus should remain in the auditorium and incognito to the members of his own troupe.

There was certainly a great mystery about the transaction, and the boy could not but associate it with some evil design.

At the same time, when he came to look the man in the face as he now sat before him, Billy was impressed with the frankness and benevolence of the man's countenance.

Answering Mr. Rawlding's question, Billy said:

"I called, Mr. Rawlding, to see what you were going to do about going on with the circus."

"That will all be fixed up to-morrow, my boy," answered the man, pompously.

Billy hesitated, and then made bold to ask:

"And the salaries?"

"Will all be settled some time to-morrow."

"It is none of my concern, but I am curious to know—I suppose you will leave the settlement in the hands of Mr. Gog-sell?"

The man looked up at the boy in surprise.

"Why do you ask?" he demanded.

"Only that I heard you were going back to Chicago to-night."

"You have been wrongly informed, sir. I shall not leave this place until this matter is all settled up. Who told you that I was going to Chicago to-night?"

Billy was in a sad quandary, but he hit upon an outlet very soon, and replied:

"It was one of the employees of the show, sir; I don't suppose you would know him if I should tell you."

"What is his name?" demanded the proprietor, sternly.

"His name is Mullen," returned Billy, with a good deal of misgiving.

"Mullen, Mullen? I don't recall him. What is his line?"

"Really, sir, I do not recall."

Billy had had a hard struggle for the falsehood, but he quickly qualified the assertion somewhat by saying:

"It seems to me I heard him say something about a tumbler, and I am led to think that he acts in that capacity."

"You think he is a tumbler, then?"

"I wouldn't say that, exactly, sir; but I am quite sure that he has something to do with the tumblers."

The man scowled and growled:

"Has something to do with the tumblers? That is very strange. What can he have to do with the tumblers, unless he is one himself? It can't be that he is a mere roustabout, and places the springboards for the tumblers, and such lackey work?"

"I don't know, sir," replied Billy.

And he was relieved when he found that the man appeared to be satisfied with the explanation; but he was not, for, after a little talk upon other topics, he reverted to this again, and grumbled:

"Mullen? Has something to do with the tumblers? By George, I must find out who the fellow is, and it will go hard with him. I wonder what motive he could have had in telling such stories?"

"I think, sir, that he got it from some other source, and told me because he knew I was anxious, as we all are, to learn something about what to depend on with regard to the future of the circus."

"That is very true, my boy," said the man, in a modified tone. "I hadn't thought of that. The fellow was probably not so much to blame, after all."

This had the effect of lifting a great load off of Billy's mind, and, having nothing more to say to the gentleman, he arose to depart, when the latter stopped him suddenly by asking:

"By the way, Bristol, I don't want to make you any trouble, but I really think I ought to see this fellow Mullen and have a talk with him. If he has meant nothing by telling about that I intended to go to Chicago to-night, all well and good, but I really ought to see him. You could identify him if you saw him, I suppose?"

"I think I could, sir."

"Very well; I may have to ask you to do it to-morrow."

"Very well."

But the boy thought to himself that it would be a long time before he could be induced to identify his friend Mugsy.

Billy was about to start again, when the man called him back, and, taking a roll of bills from his pocket, said:

"By the way, there is quite a sum in back salary coming to you, is there not, my boy?"

"About two hundred dollars, possibly a little more, but about that, I think."

"Very well, here are two hundred dollars. Whatever difference there is we can make it up after we get out of our tangle."

Billy took the money gratefully, thanked the gentleman, and was once more on the point of withdrawing, when Rawlding again arrested him with the question:

"Do you remember that tall man—I think his name was Hunter—whom I saw with you on several occasions?"

Billy's heart sank, but he returned a timid affirmative.

"What has become of him?"

"I don't know, sir," answered the boy.

"Well, good-by. I shall see you to-morrow."

As he put out his hand to take Billy's, the latter was astonished at sight of a peculiar ring on the man's finger.

CHAPTER XVII. A CLOSE CALL.

When Billy returned to the street he found Mugsy anxiously awaiting him.

"W'ot luck, Bareback?" inquired the boy.

"Great luck," replied Billy.

"Good! W'ot is it?"

"Well, to begin with, I have got my salary, so that we can go back and pay the old landlord."

"Yer don't mean to say it?"

"It is true. Here it is."

And Billy pulled out the roll.

"D'at's better luck d'an we was alookin' fer, as d'e cove said w'en he expected he'd git a life sentence an' was condemned to be 'lectrocuted. I wonder if d'e ol' cove won't give us er better rume ter-night, one w'd er air-hole inter it?"

"Perhaps. But that is not all the luck I have had."

"W'ot, more? Out w'd it?"

"Wait till we get further along where no one can hear us."

They walked along for some distance, and then Billy resumed:

"You remember I told you there were certain pieces of jewelry stolen at the time of the robbery in New York?"

"Yep."

"I think I showed you the list of conspicuous pieces that could be readily recognized?"

"So yer did, Bareback."

"Do you recall any of them?"

The boy reflected for some moments, and finally mused:

"D'ere was one, I 'member. It wos er snake coiled 'roun' an' d'e eyes wos red rubies. Is d'at right?"

"Strange that you should have hit upon the particular one at once. Do you know that the fellow has that identical ring on his hand at this moment?"

"Yer don't palaver?"

"Yes, sir; I couldn't help noticing it when he shook hands with me at parting."

"D'at's er clincher! W'ot're a-goin' ter do?"

"I am to see him to-morrow with regard to another matter, and I shall make further investigation, and if I discover anything further I shall use the authority this warrants vests in me and have him arrested on suspicion. Once under arrest and the man is examined, the rest will doubtless come out."

"Yer say he's ter see yer ter-morrer?"

"Yes."

"But I t'ought he wos a-goin' ter She-cago ter-morrer?"

"He denies it, and it is with regard to that very thing that I am to see him."

"W'ot d'ye mean?"

"I'll tell you, Mugsy, and I don't want you to feel harsh toward me, for it was unavoidable under the circumstances. I had to tell him that a man by the name of Mullen told me he was going to Chicago."

Mugsy scowled.

"As I say, it was unavoidable under the circumstances, and after all, I don't know but we can make capital out of it."

"How's d'at?"

"Suppose I take you to his room and identify you as the person who told me?"

"W'ot?" gasped Mugsy. "Put my neck inter a halter?"

"Not a bit of it. Listen. You will confess that you told me, and make any excuse that comes uppermost. Tell him that somebody else told you—the chap who wanted to take your five-dollar bill, for instance. The point is to get into conversation with him, get as much out of him as possible, and if, in the end, we feel that we are justified in doing so, we shall put this warrant into the sheriff's hands and let him serve it on him."

"But w'ot will his joblots say ter me, in der mean time?"

"What do you care what he says? You certainly are not afraid of him, especially as there are two of us, and you alone got away with the detective."

"Oh, I ain't afeared on 'im, on'y d'e tongue-lashin', d'at's w'ot I hates."

"That won't hurt you," laughed Billy.

With happy hearts the boys returned to the house of their kindly benefactor that night. Billy pulled out his roll and paid for the time they had stopped at the house and for the night's lodgings and the breakfast they were to get in the morning.

The old man was equally as happy, and said:

"I knew you were honest boys. I have never been fooled in my life. I would have trusted you with any amount that I could have afforded."

How easy it is to say such things when you have struck luck so that you can pay! But what would have been the tone had the boys been disappointed?

Early the following forenoon the boys called at the hotel where Rawlding had been stopping, but only to find that the rumor of his going to Chicago was well grounded, for he had left the night before.

Billy was greatly put out, for he had anticipated that they should soon have the fellow in the toils.

Billy, explaining the status of affairs to the landlord, was permitted to go up and examine the room lately occupied by the circus proprietor.

Everything had been removed which had belonged to the lodger, and there appeared nothing by which he could be identified as the wanted man.

The boys were on the point of quitting the room, when Mugsy's attention was drawn to an envelope which had got shoved under the edge of a clothes-press, so that the corner only remained sticking out.

The boy picked it up and read the superscription. It read:

"Mr. David S. Fielding, — West Madison, Street, Chicago, Ill."

Mugsy handed the envelope to Billy, whose first move, after reading the direction, was to look inside for a possible letter. But there was none.

"This is a lucky find, Mugsy," assumed Billy. "This not only fixes the identity of the man, but gives us the direction where to find him."

"D'yer 'spect ter foller 'im?"

"Certainly. We shall start on the first train."

"D'at's funny."

"What is funny?"

"D'at d'e bloke gived yer d'e stuff las' night ter foller 'im d'is mornin'."

"It is a little singular. But, perhaps he did not surmise that the money would be put to that use when he gave it to me, or he would not have been so generous."

As they were leaving the hotel, they met the manager, Mr. Cogsell.

"Hullo, Mr. Cogsell!" greeted Mugsy. "I t'ought youse tol' me d'at d'at per-pri-ter wos agoin' ter fix t'ings up ter-day?"

"So he is," replied the manager, gruffly. "I am expecting a check from him every minute with which to pay everything off."

"He has returned to Chicago, then?" put in Billy.

"Certainly. He went last night, as I told you he intended doing."

"Ah, you forget, Mr. Cogsell," objected the boy, laughing. "If you remember, you told me that he had already gone."

"Well, it is the same thing," answered Cogsell, angrily, growing very red.

"It is not quite the same thing, sir. I saw and talked with Mr. Rawlding at least four hours after you told me he had gone."

"Then, sir, you mean to tell me I lied!" snarled the fellow, growing furious.

"D'at's 'bout d'e size on it," put in Mugsy, stepping up. "Some calls it pervarycaytin', an' some calls it eggsajjer-atin', and some calls it amplyfyin' d'e varassyty, but we calls it plain lyin' in d'is country."

The manager glared first at one of the boys and then at the other, but muttering an imprecation, he turned and strode away.

"D'at's d'e bes' way outen it, sonny," called out Mugsy. "D'ere's a heeps o' ways ter win in er fight, but d'e easies' way is ter run away afore it begins. Youse's head's level, if it is a little soft."

"There is more evidence of the crookedness of this crowd," observed Billy. "And now, after hearing what this manager said, I believe he is as crooked as Rawlding himself."

"Oh, d'ese show people's er awful set!" moaned Mugsy. "It don't seem d'at d'ere wos er hones' one among 'em. D'ere wos d'e soobret w'ot wanted ter tech me d'e udder night, an' d'en d'ere wos d'e cove w'd d'e vinegar phiz, w'ot wanted ter bunco me fer me five-plunk note, d'en d'ere is his w'lskers, d'e boss, doin' me outen me sal'ry, an' on top of all comes d'is measley shape doin' d'e An-anias ac'. Oh, if ever I git outen d'e show business ye'll never ketch me inter it ag'in."

About noon the boys took the train for Chicago.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MYSTERY OUT.

When they had been seated in the train for a little while Mugsy noticed a man, who sat in the seat directly in front of them, watching him and his companion.

At least, so it appeared to the boy from New York.

The man occupied the whole seat by himself, and sat lengthwise on it, with his back against the window and his legs across the arm of the seat at the other end.

He was pretending to read a newspaper, but Mugsy noticed that his eyes were glinting over or to one side of the paper most of the time and directed at himself and Billy.

He was an odd-looking chap, short and thick-set, with a beefy face and that gen-

eral bulldog look we see in many men who hang about the race-track.

His attire also bore out the impression of "sportiness."

"I wonder w'ot his pimples over d'ere sees in us ter admire?" observed Mugsy, at last.

"Maybe he thinks he knows you, Mugsy?" suggested Billy, laughing. "He looks as if he might be a product of the purlieus of the Bowery or some other tough district."

"W'ot's d'at? D'e Bow'ry er tough deestrick?" muttered Mugsy. "Say, me fren', w'en yer steps on d'e Bow'ry's toes yer steps on mine. D'e Bow'ry's d'e garden spot o' d'e world! W'ot yer cain't find in d'e Bow'ry ain't wort' havin'. See?"

"Oh, the Bowery is all right," laughed Billy. "But you've run away from your subject. We were discussing the gent in the next seat," and glancing at the party, Billy saw his fishy eyes staring out from behind the newspaper at him.

Billy was somewhat startled at the manner in which the fellow stared, and then, before he had time for a second thought, the man put down his newspaper and spoke.

"Excuse me," he said, "but if I am not mistaken, you gentlemen belong to the show that was stranded back at Kalamazoo?"

Billy was on the point of giving the questioner some evasive answer, when he was forestalled by Mugsy, who said:

"No, we don't b'long ter d'e show, mister, but d'e show belongs ter us—d'at is, er part on it."

"I see," laughed the fellow, good-naturedly. "Something like myself. I have a small claim in that direction. Goin' over to Chicago to look after your claim, I suppose?"

There was a frankness and apparent honesty about the fellow that at once disarmed Billy of suspicion against the stranger, and he replied:

"Well, yes, we thought we'd run over and see what we could do in the matter."

"I'm afraid you'll have a wild-goose chase, same as myself," chuckled the man; "it's generally a very cold day when anybody gets any dust out of Dave Fielding. But he won't beat me this time, if I know myself. I'll take it out of his hide if I can't do any better."

"David Fielding?" gasped Billy. "Why, the proprietor of the show is named Rawldings."

"Sure!" laughed the stranger. "On the bills. Same's yours is Bareback Billy on the bills, but in private life our friend is known as David Fielding, just as you are known as William Bristol."

This was a startler for Billy.

How came the stranger to know his name? Billy was certain that he had never seen him before.

And then the man put him at his ease by saying:

"You're surprised that I should know your real name. Well, that is not unnatural, seeing the position you hold; but I got it in another way. Do you remember Hunter?"

"Yes."

"Oh, d'at poor shape?" put in Mugsy.

"Well, Hunter was on Fielding's trail as the possible robber who did the job in Maiden Lane. Hunter was pretty near right, but not quite. He would have struck it in time, maybe, as he had a list of the property stolen, but he got into a row in Big Rapids and during the melee lost the paper out of his pocket. So, thinking that he could do nothing without it, he gave up the job and went back to New York."

"What did Hunter tell you about me?" inquired Billy, anxiously.

"Oh, not much. He said he had given you a picture of Fielding with the idea of having you discover him in the audience some time while doing your acts."

"But you say that Hunter was not quite right?" interposed Billy, eagerly. "Do you mean to intimate that Fielding is not the man?"

"I do."

Billy hesitated, and then asked:

"You seem to know a good deal about this affair; would it be asking too much to inquire how you know that he is not the man?"

"Certainly not," replied the stranger, promptly. "The way I happen to know that he is not the man is by knowing who the real man is."

Billy stared at him inquiringly, but did not deign to ask the question that he would have liked to ask.

But it was not necessary, for the fellow quickly followed his last remarks with:

"What put Hunter off the track was a statement in the newspapers directly after the robbery to the effect that it had been committed by Fielding. And so it had, but not by Dave Fielding. Dave has a brother, a worthless scalawag, who hangs out when it is necessary for him to keep shady at Big Rapids, where he has some relatives. Dave is none too good to go into a thing of this kind, but he's too big a coward; so he lets Tom do the dirty work, and he generally reaps the better part of the profits."

"How is that?" asked Billy.

"Why, you see, thief-like, Tom never has a cent a week after making a haul, and he lives off of Dave between times. So when he makes a strike he has to whack up with Dave, and very liberally, too."

Billy reflected for some time.

There were several things he would have liked to have asked the fellow, but was averse to letting him know that he (Billy) was in any way interested in the case; but he finally plucked up courage to ask the question:

"Has Hunter discovered his mistake yet?"

"Oh, yes; he knows by this time that it was Tom, and not Dave," was the answer.

"Why does he not run Tom in, then?"

"He has good reason for not doing so. In the first place, as I told you, he has lost the list of articles stolen, which was the only clew he had to work on—the only evidence he could have brought against the man; and in the second place, if he had the list now it would do him no good, as Tom has already disposed of all the goods."

"I suppose that Dave got some of them?"

"Possibly, but he is too cunning to keep them in his possession."

After a long silence, Billy asked:

"Have you any idea what arrangements Fielding is going to make with regard to the circus?"

The fellow laughed heartily, and then answered:

"He isn't going to make any arrangements about it. It isn't for him to make the arrangements. I own the show, at present. If he can settle my claim when I get over here, however, the show will again be his, and he can make any blessed arrangements he sees fit. At present, Joey Stubble holds the key to the problem, and it will take just fifteen thousand bills to solve it."

Billy was perplexed.

If what the fellow had said was true, his trip to Chicago would be for nothing.

Likewise, if it was true, he should be

going in the opposite direction, for the man he was after, and for whom he held the evidence which would convict him—provided he still retained any of the jewelry. But if he did not, even that would be a wild-goose chase, and in the mean time Billy's money was being eaten up, with neither prospect of profit from the investment nor hope of earning any more at an early date.

It was in something of this bewildered state of mind that he alighted from the train at Chicago a little before ten o'clock at night.

"W'ot's d'e lay now, Bareback?" asked his companion.

"Blessed if I know which way to turn," replied Billy. "From what that man has told us, I'm afraid we will have had our trip for nothing. I am sorry we were so precipitate."

"Say, Bareback, I wouldn't take no more stock in w'ot d'at bloke was ablowin' at yer d'an I would in d'e reckymendashuns of er Baxter Street barker as ter d'e quality of der duds inside d'e joint. In my 'umble 'pinion, d'at rooster's got er bugle in his t'roat, an' ever' time he breads he w'istles."

"You wouldn't put much reliance in what he says, then?"

"No more'n I would in d'e woid of er Bow'ry moosyem puller-in."

"Well, late as it is, I think we had better make a call upon Mr. Rawlding, alias Dave Fielding," suggested Billy.

Engaging a cab, the boys were in a short time set down at the address in West Madison Street.

They stopped to perfect their plans of action before entering the house, and while they stood in the shadow of the stoop talking, two men emerged from the front door and came down the stoop.

CHAPTER XIX.

IN THE TOILS AT LAST.

It was too dark for Billy and his friend to be able to discern positively who the men were, but from the figure of one, which was short and thick-set, they guessed at once that this was the same man they had seen and talked with in the car.

The other person was a tall, trim man, and it was not much of a stretch of the imagination to put him down as Fielding.

At all events, they concluded that it would be safe to shadow the pair, and, as they strode away from the stoop as soon as they reached the sidewalk, the boys put off after them, taking care not to get close enough to make themselves conspicuous enough to attract the two men's attention.

As the pair passed under a street lamp the young shadowers observed that the tall man carried a tin box, similar to that used by treasurers of theaters and such like institutions, where large sums of money have to be transported.

The men had gone in the direction of the river, and the boys soon found themselves in the low, vicious quarter adjacent to Canal Street.

Only four or five blocks had been traversed altogether, when the men turned into a narrow side street, and shortly afterward stopped at a tumble-down rookery, that looked as if it might be the habitation of a beggar.

The tall man opened the door with a key which he had taken from his pocket and the pair passed in and closed the door.

The place was in darkness, but shortly after the men went in a light appeared and shone through the shutters, which were closed.

"D'at's d'e stuff, Bareback," whispered Mugsy. "D'is is w'ot d'ey call

row-mans, I reckon. It beats all d'e dime novels—"

"Never mind the romance," interrupted Billy, impatiently. "Let us get to business. You remain here, while I go to the back of the house, and if those chaps come out before I return, lose no time in giving me the tip, and in the meantime don't, for your life, lose sight of them."

"Right here I stand's, like Casybianker on d'e burnin' deck," murmured Mugsy, defiantly; "an' all d'e hoodlums in Shecago can't make me skedaddle!"

Billy hastened to the rear of the shanty. There was a shed or kitchen at the rear of the house, with only a single small window, and this was closed with a solid shutter, except for a star-shaped hole sawed out in the center.

This was at a height some distance above the boy's head, so he looked about and soon found a box to stand on.

When elevated upon the box, he could look through the hole in the shutter, and had a fair view of the interior of the shanty, for the back door of the main room was open and the light shone out into the shed into which he was looking.

The men were sitting at a table, although Billy could see only one of them, the tall man, whom he had no trouble in recognizing as Fielding.

The tin box was before him, and he was taking something which sparkled from it.

They were laughing and talking, but he could make out nothing of what they were saying.

So only remaining long enough to satisfy himself on the points mentioned, the boy hastened back to the front of the house, and hurrying up to his comrade, said:

"It's all right. The game is safe so far. Stay right here while I run to the nearest police station for a squad of police. If they should attempt to leave the place, shadow them and find out where they go."

"Come one, come all, d'is board side-walk shall fly f'om it's muddy foundashun quicker'n me!" cried the boy, heroically.

But Billy had not remained to hear the last of it, for he was off in the direction of the police station.

When he had told his story, and exhibited his warrant to the sergeant, the latter looked at him in astonishment.

"It strikes me that you're pretty young to be a detective," he said, "especially on a case like this. Why, do you know that some of the best men in the country have been working on this case, and given it up?"

"Perhaps, sir," replied Billy, impatiently. "but I'll be awfully obliged to you if you will kindly detail a squad of men to go with me to the place where I have the game treed."

The sergeant hesitated a moment, and then responded:

"Blamed if I don't do it! There is something in that honest face of yours that tells me you are a hero in disguise," and the sergeant called the doorman and ordered him to send six men who were there in reserve.

The men at once reported, and the sergeant instructed them to accompany the boy.

The whole transaction had occupied but a few minutes, and in ten minutes more Billy, with his squad at his heels, arrived in front of the shanty.

"All right, Mugsy?" he inquired, in a low tone, when he met his companion.

"Right as er right," replied the boy, at the same time saluting the officers as if he had been a subordinate. "In my 'pinion d'eir jes' 'bout in d'e ac' of enjoyin' er bottle as d'is preshus momint."

"Better surround the house, hadn't

we?" suggested the acting sergeant in charge of the squad.

"That will be the best thing to be done," rejoined Billy. "There is only one outlet from the rear, a single door, so that a couple of men will be enough to guard that."

Two minutes later this was arranged; then Billy, with the squad of four at his back, rapped at the front door.

There was no response, although the hum of conversation which had been heard a second before ceased.

Billy repeated the summons, and that not having the desired effect, the sergeant administered a number of vigorous blows with his blackjack.

Still there was no response, and Billy said:

"The quickest and simplest way is to smash the door in. What do you think, sir?"

"In she goes!" muttered the sergeant, and, summoning a couple of men, they threw their weight against the panels, and all went in with a crash.

And the crash was followed, simultaneously, with another crash, for the moment the door flew open there were two quick, almost simultaneous shots from the men within.

This was followed, instantly, by a volley from the police, and a groan was heard within the room, which was now in darkness, the men having dashed the light, evidently, at the first alarm.

There was a pause and a moment of silence; then the sergeant, who stood listening, heard a scuffle going on in the darkness, and was mystified at it.

But these significant words explained all:

"No yer don't, Mister Joey Stubble! Yer don't use no sticker on your'n trooly! D'ere! How's d'at fer er air-brake grip? How's d'at feel on ye'r mixed-ale canal?"

This was followed by a low gurgling sound, as of some one being choked.

There was also the sound of scuffling in another part of the room, mingled with muttered imprecations and an occasional groan.

The sergeant struck a match and held it over his head, to behold on the floor two pairs of scufflers.

Billy had the circus proprietor down, but it was a question which would win in the long run, as Fielding was clearly the stronger man of the two.

The case was different, however, with Mugsy and his antagonist. The boy was on top and had his horny fingers clinched around the sporting man's jugular like rods of steel; the man was already purple in the face, and evidently rapidly approaching insensibility.

The sergeant, recognizing the status of affairs with Billy, hastened to relieve him of his strain by administering a sounding blow or two with his night-stick on the head of the crook professional.

Mugsy's man required no such treatment, for the boy arose, a moment later, but his antagonist remained prostrate on the floor.

"Well, you're a champion, my boy!" commented the sergeant.

"Oh, d'at's nuttin'," asseverated Mugsy, coolly, wiping the sweat from his forehead. "D'at's on'y pastime, wras'-lin' w'd ducks like him."

The candle, which was found on the floor, was relighted; the men were at once handcuffed, and soon were in the patrol wagon on the way to the station.

The following day Billy and Mugsy took the train for New York.

In due course Fielding was extradited and taken back to the city where the robbery had been committed, and was there tried and convicted.

Billy received the reward of ten thousand dollars, which he had worked so hard to earn, and immediately made an even division with his faithful friend, Mugsy Mullen.

"D'at beats sellin' d'e ice-col'," observed the boy, as he folded the bills and put them into his pocket. "I wonder if d'is duck won't make d'em coves on the ol' Bow'ry open d'eir eyes w'en I gits on me new togs an' me blazer? Say! d'ey'll take me fer Jimmy Corbett! D'at's right."

THE END.

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